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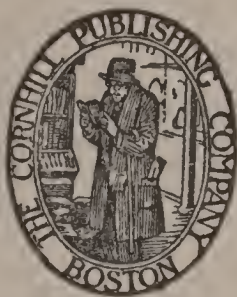
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SOIL, THE MASTER



SOIL, THE MASTER

BY
ROSENA A. GILES,



BOSTON, U. S. A.

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. A Preposterous Idea	3
II. No Trick to Farm	13
III. How Dustan Felt About It . .	17
IV. Some Farmers and Some Farms	22
V. Getting Civilized	38
VI. Serious Farming and New Year Greetings from the Trades- people	49
VII. Mr. Cross and Annette Disagree	65
VIII. Things Look Bright for the In- digent O. F.'s	74
IX. Annette Digs Into an Unfamil- iar Strata	86
X. So She Got a New Ford, and Hired a New Man	101
XI. Annette Receives a Proposal — the Hand of the Master . .	115

	PAGE
XII. Everything Happened — Boot- leg — and Vecky Laid an Egg	139
XIII. Two Kinds of Men Show Their Mettle	151
XIV. So She Thought the Farm Needed a Manager	169
XV. Then Another One Proposed .	175
XVI. “ In the Spring a Young Man’s Fancy ” — Takes a Curious Turn	183
XVII. The Farm Becomes Engaged .	193
XVIII. Celia Comes Back	199
XIX. “ Annette, I’ve Been Waiting ”	206
XX. An Old Hand Comes Back and Zed Goes A-Hunting	217
XXI. Halleck Gave Dick Patton His Lesson	228
XXII. In Which Dick Patton Doesn’t Die	236
XXIII. Francis Boalt Must Go To Chicago	242

CONTENTS

vii

	PAGE
XXIV. "Blood Wipes Out Dishonor"	250
XXV. Halleck Proves His Love . . .	261
XXVI. "All the Tomorrows"	267
XXVII. In the City	272
XXVIII. Celia Hears of Paul's Death .	282
XXIX. And Martha was so Flustrated — She had on One White Stocking, and the Other was Black	284
XXX. The Broken Statue	289
XXXI. The New Owner	298

SOIL, THE MASTER

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CHAPTER I

A PREPOSTEROUS IDEA

I didn't want to be interrupted that June morning, for I had a smashing idea for a caricature poster about a farmer who looked so much like his own scarecrow that an automobile salesman happening along, helped him to plant himself in the cornfield, and took the scarecrow into town and treated it to a lemon soda!

I was crazy to get it done before Paul came home to lunch; and I was getting along fine with the chin whiskers, the galluses, and the hay sticking out through the hole in his hat, when the door-bell of the apartment rang as though it would never stop.

Thinking it was a vegetable peddler from *way out* in the country beyond South San Francisco, on the farming land down toward San Mateo, (that's the way they ring) I didn't pay any attention. I never patronized them

anyway, for they always wore great heavy boots and had dirty fingernails.

I didn't know there was anyone in except myself, for I'd seen Mrs. Daniels, the landlady, go out with a market basket on her arm, but in a minute I heard her pussy footing down the hall in the felt slippers that she always wore around the house.

Almost directly she rapped on my studio door.

"Are you in, Miss Torrel?" she asked experimentally. Evidently she thought I wasn't.

"No. I don't want anything." I called, because I didn't want her to come in, nosing around, she was so curious.

My voice being positive proof of my presence, she opened the door and poked in a card, her dust-capped head with it.

"Gentleman to see you," she whined.

"To see me?"

Since no gentleman I knew (except Dustan Carter) was likely to come at that hour, and Dustan didn't generally present a card for admittance, I laid down my charcoal and took the card with sooty fingers. It read:

"Francis Boalt, Atty-at-Law."

"Good gracious! What's he selling? Tell him I don't want it. Besides I'm broke."

"He asked to see you."

I scowled. "I'm terribly busy; but let him in, if he's bound to come," I said ungraciously, and she withdrew.

When the tall, middle-aged, gray-mustached, terribly provincial looking individual presented himself at my door, I looked him over unsympathetically from his shrunken trouser legs to his iron gray hair, and said:

"How do you do?"

He appraised me with his rather keen blue eyes — I could see that. He looked pleased (for I've never been considered hard to look at) but not awfully satisfied, as he held out his hand and shook my reluctant one with a friendly warmth, quite different from the professional grip.

"Miss Annette Torrel?"

"Yes." I hadn't removed my paint-stained apron, and I didn't ask him to sit down, because I didn't want him to get planted and stay all day, while neglected Inspiration got up in a huff and vanished. But he showed how countryfied he was by sitting down uninvited. Evidently he intended to stay.

He leaned back in his chair, slapped his soft gray hat once or twice against the region of his stomach and crossed his gray trousered knees. (His up foot in the air, looked a yard long.)

In the interest of Art, I wanted to ask him to

retire it somewhat into the background, the perspective being too sudden for the proper artistic value.

He saw my eyes on his foot, as I waited for him to state his excuse for this interruption. He put it down constrainedly, and cleared his throat.

"I came to see you, Miss Torrel, in person," he began; "at the request of your uncle, Nathaniel Manheim."

"Uncle Nat?" My thoughts and eyes flew to the drawing on the easel board, where the blocked in farmer caricature was unmistakable. Uncle Nat was a farmer.

His eyes followed mine, and back to my face; but I couldn't tell what his odd look meant.

"Yes?" I said again. And as there seemed no escape, I sat down opposite him and began, rudely, I admit, making with my charcoaled finger a symmetrical design of smudges around the edges of Francis Boalt's card.

He noticed what I was doing, for, in spite of his provincialism, his eyes were taking in considerable. But I kept right on.

"You know, I suppose," he continued, with an edge on his tone; "that your uncle is dead?"

I looked up with a certain feeling of regret. "No, I didn't." I wiped the card on my apron

and laid it on the table; at the same time assuming a more respectful mental attitude toward my visitor.

Mr. Boalt went on with details.

"I am sorry," I said; "that we didn't know. Since Aunt Miriam died, our correspondence has been quite limited. Our mother is dead, and our lives are so different — he didn't seem very near. I wrote once or twice, I remember. He didn't answer."

"I suppose not. But at the last he recalled that you and your brother —"

"Paul," I supplied. "Paul isn't strong," I added unnecessarily.

"— are the only Manheims left," he concluded.

"We aren't Manheims," I interrupted. "Our name is Torrel."

"Your mother was a Manheim, and, as you know, Nathaniel Manheim outlived all his children, so he made his will, leaving you his farm."

"His farm! To me?" I cried, shocked. I shook my head vigorously. "A farm! Goodness. No. I don't *want* it."

"But my dear young lady!" Francis Boalt flushed and took me up in consternation. "You must realize it is a very valuable piece of property."

I laughed, feeling rather foolish. "Of course. I never think of a ranch as something of money value. Certainly. I could rent, or sell it."

He held up his hand with a most unprofessionally calloused palm.

"No, no!" he said decidedly. "Under conditions of the will, you must live on it five years."

I sat up and stared at him.

"Live on it!" I echoed incredulously. "Me? Buried on a ranch for five years? I'd rather be buried *anywhere* else *permanently*."

Francis Boalt went on in spite of my vehemence. "If at the end of that time, it is on a paying basis, it is yours to do as you wish with it."

"But if it isn't?" I demanded. "And of course it wouldn't be. How could I make a ranch pay? I've hardly ever been on one. I hate ranches! I inherit the feeling. My mother was raised on a ranch, and she ran away from home to escape from it. It wouldn't be paying at the end of a hundred years!" In my excitement I got up and walked around the room.

"Your uncle did not seem to hold such a view," reasoned my visitor. "He wanted you to come back to the land. He hated to see it pass into strangers' hands. And the Manheims have been farmers for generations."

"Since the days of the Feudal Barons," I said, rather contemptuously; "bred in the bone, and dyed in the wool. But I am a Torrel."

"It is a dairy farm," continued Mr. Boalt, returning to his subject like a book agent; "some good cows —"

I turned on him. "Cows!" I almost shrieked. "Cows scare me to death. I know nothing about cows, except to get on the other side of the fence! And to be marooned for five years with a lot of cows!"

"They need not necessarily be your only companions," he suggested with a touch of dry humor that I could not ignore. I laughed grimly.

He smiled in a companionable way, his constraint gone, and talked on argumentatively as if he were addressing a jury; but the distaste that my mother's stories of farm life had distilled in me, made me see no virtue in the proposition.

I shook my head. "I can't see it. I don't know what Uncle Nat was thinking of."

"My dear young lady," Francis Boalt rose to his tall thin height, perhaps for emphasis, perhaps preparing to end the interview. "There is in this opportunity, a great deal to study over. Not only that, but it is also a test as to

whether you are a Manheim. And on this I think your uncle figured. The Manheims have always been true sports, ready to take a chance. Here is a chance for big money, if you win. If you lose — “ he glanced around my little studio, and I saw he recognized the camouflage of the wall bed. (I could see also that he thought I wouldn’t lose much.) His keen eyes returned to mine as he held out his big hand. “ As I say, it is a sporting chance. Think it over. Talk to your brother about it. There’s no immediate hurry; but let me know your decision soon.”

I didn’t make any answer except to let him shake my hand again. I don’t know what he thought as I accompanied him to the front door in silence, and let him out. I sneaked back to the studio so that Mrs. Daniels wouldn’t hear me, and locked the door.

But she had heard the front door close, and in a minute she knocked on my door and tried the knob. I could *hear* the disappointment in her step as she shuffled back to her own apartment.

I sat down on the chair that Francis Boalt had vacated and reviewed the ridiculous proposition. It didn’t look alluring to me in any way. What would Paul say? “ The Manheims have always been true sports.” Weren’t the Torrels?

Paul and I had been all of the family for eight years. Father had left us when Paul was eleven, and Mother went a year later. Father's estate was a few canvases, the sale of which had helped eke out the wage of Mother's needle. And Mother had left me, Paul; and Paul, me. That was about all our legacy except what I had inherited of my father's talent, and a flood of loving memories.

Well, we'd got along. I had turned my brush strokes into a modest living, and Uncle Nat had put Paul through school. Yet I had to face the thing squarely. There wasn't much future in it. I was twenty-eight and had worked hard, yet so far, I had gained little even among local artists. I had succeeded just once in getting by the Exhibition door, and was skied so high that even my friends had lame necks for weeks afterwards trying to locate my canvas.

Dustan Carter had kept me at it. There was no doubt that he had the "divine fire," and if I married him I could limp along on his name; but that wasn't success. Besides I didn't particularly want to marry Dusty, or anybody else. I had to take care of Paul. Dusty wanted me, I knew that; though he had asked me only twice, barring last night when he had jokingly slipped the handsome diamond from his finger to mine.

We all knew that diamond, his mother's engagement ring, was destined for Dusty's wife.

I spread out my left hand recalling how the jewel had flashed in the light. I was awfully vain of my hands which somebody was always wanting to paint or model because of their beauty. The ring fitted my finger exactly; and I had only to close my hand on it and it would have been mine with all the perquisites of Dustan Carter's name and rising genius. I didn't though. I wasn't ready. I took it off and wished it onto his slim artistic finger. But I knew by his look that that didn't end it.

He'd have been shocked if he had known what I wished. I wished if I ever *did* marry him, that his sister Serena would get kidnapped by the Shah of Persia, and remain in his harem during my lifetime. I *did* dislike Serena.

Well, this was a long way from the ranch problem, yet the more I thought about Uncle Nat's preposterous idea, the less feasible it seemed. The clock struck 11.30. I sprang up. Paul's lunch!

I went into the kitchenette and lighted the gas. I'd wait and see what Paul had to say.

CHAPTER II

NO TRICK TO FARM

I had lunch nearly ready when I heard Paul come in. He was coughing rather badly, for the fog had come in earlier than usual, and it was raw and cold outside. That cough worried me terribly, and his being shut up in a bank all day down town didn't help it any. I had watched Father cough his life away just so.

I turned the gas low and went into the studio, which was our living room and dining room by day, and my bedroom at night.

Paul stood before my easel laughing and coughing with a bright flush on his cheek. He looked around at me, his hazel eyes dancing.

“ Say, Puss, this is ripping! ”

To his amazement I took the thumb tacks out of the drawing board, crumpled up Farmer Corntossel beyond recognition, and tossed him into the waste basket.

I faced Paul tragically, and in a few minutes I had told him all about Francis Boalt's astounding visit.

“ What do you know about that! ” said Paul in an awed voice, sweeping his wavy brown

hair back from his wide forehead with his thin, clerkly fingers. "It sounds like a bill at the Alcazar: 'Struggling artist on the brink of starvation! Family lawyer! Rich uncle!' Say, Kid Ann! Our fortune's made! We can hold the giddy ranch down for five years, sell it for fifty thousand, invest the money in Gilt Edge and live like princes."

"But Paul," I reminded him; "It isn't as easy as that. We've got to make it pay."

"Pooh! Don't you lie awake nights over that. You know you're some little manager. Besides, its no trick to farm. Anybody can farm; and make money. Say, Nette, you never saw such hicks as come into the bank to deposit money. *Wads* of it! *Thousands* of dollars. Honestly, they don't know a street car from an elevator; some of 'em can hardly write their own names. But there they are — making money like a mint — just farming. All come in automobiles. Why, its a *snap*! We could be on Easy Street in six months."

Paul's enthusiasm swayed, but did not convince me. I remembered the tales of my mother's hard youth.

"But I know I wouldn't like it, Paul," I objected; "such hard, rough work, and so lonesome."

"Pshaw, Annette! That's nothing. You

could come to the city every couple of months. Where is this ranch? ”

“ You know where it is; Uncle Nat’s farm up in Stonehouse County. It hasn’t moved.”

“ Oh, sure! I know a chap who goes up there all the time, to Chico — that’s in Stonehouse County — to visit his cousins. They feed him on fried chicken and cream, and fresh eggs — laid by real hens. They’ve got a Hudson Super, and they tear the world up: joy rides, picnics and dances! He says some of the country girls are real pippins. Why it’s the chance of our lives, Puss.”

Paul’s eloquence was not exhausted when he came home in the evening. He followed me into the kitchenette, still brimming over with enthusiasm.

“ I was talking to Morrisey — his brother has a pal who’s married up country — Yreka — that’s in Stonehouse County. He’s telling me all about saddle horses. Says they just give ’em away up there — practically — and of course it doesn’t cost anything to keep ’em on a ranch; they just turn ’em out. Morrisey and Hunter and Pete are all coming up to stay a month with us. I told ’em we’d give ’em a good time, all right.”

Paul paused to sniff at the strawberries I’d got for dinner.

“ We’ll have our own strawberries. Finest berries in the world raised in Glad Valley — that’s in Stonehouse County. Pete’s father works in the wholesale market. Says crates and crates come in. Want these on the table? Oh, say! ” He paused at the swinging door, “ I went down to look at cars. We can get a Studebaker Six — finest sort of a ranch car for — ”

“ Paul, Paul! ” I broke in. “ We haven’t gone to the ranch yet.”

Paul looked at me astounded. “ Well, we’re going; aren’t we? I got the promise of two Airedale pups. And,” he added; “ maybe I could get rid of this confounded cough that’s hacking my head off.”

That settled it. I put my arms tight around his neck and kissed him.

“ Yes, Paul. We’ll go. I’ll write to Francis Boalt tonight.”

You see, Paul and I had only each other in all the world.

CHAPTER III

HOW DUSTAN FELT ABOUT IT

When our friends heard about it, they all said that I was the luckiest person they had ever known. They raved over ranches and the country, and all planned to come and see us. And could they have cream, fried chicken, strawberries, buttermilk and new-laid eggs; and pick wild flowers, go swimming, boating, picnicking, horseback riding, to country dances, pitch hay and hunt for mushrooms? And would Mt. Lassen erupt every day?

Paul readily promised them all these things. But Elsie Stein whose father had just sold his ranch in Fresno County and had come to the city to live, looked wise at me, shook her straw-colored head, and said emphatically:

“Believe me, Kid! Elsie’s not coming to see you. Elsie’s fed up on ranches. After you’ve been in quarantine for six months, escape if possible, and come down. We’ll run amuck for a couple of weeks. I can’t look a fried chicken in the face. It’s a lot easier to extract the milk from the milkman, than an old cow, and I can get all the scenery that I can assimilate at the Cliff House.”

I nodded to Elsie. Though I did feel rather excited over the novelty and stir of it all, I had no rosy dreams concerning the ranch. My mind was full of the horrors my mother had fled from: cooking over wood fires in July, with the mercury at one hundred and ten degrees, carrying water in buckets from an outside well, rising at five in the morning, doing one's own washing, ironing, baking, house cleaning — and of the awful stillness and lonesomeness! Elsie and I compared these notes, out of the fullness of Elsie's own experience.

But Paul pooh-poohed all this. Things had changed since Mother's time. Automobiles and motor trucks had made the country almost like the city, with a lot of the disagreeable things such as noise and hurry left out.

A week later Francis Boalt's answer came, and I was in the studio, just sitting there thinking about it all. The clock had just struck two. Through the window the street outside looked hot, and the asphalt shone black and runny in spots. Cars and trucks were tearing up and down feverishly, because it was Saturday and they had to get it all done by six o'clock, I suppose. The "rags, bottles, sacks" man meandered down the street with his raucous cry; his old gray horse crawling along with a loose shoe clinking against the pavement.

It should have made me think longingly of cool, shady recesses and purling streams of the ranch; but instead, I recalled my mother's stories of the hot noons in the farm kitchen, and voracious appetites of the hay balers.

The studio door, being ajar, was then pushed open and Dustan came in. He certainly looked cool and refreshing in his white flannels and straw hat, with a pink carnation in his button-hole. He held, too, a big bunch of glowing pink Killarnies done up in wax paper.

His naturally pale face was paler than usual and very serious. His black eyes darker, and his black hair, which he always wore combed back from his broad white forehead, seemed still darker by contrast. Dustan wasn't particularly handsome; his features were too cold and aquiline, but he was very distinguished looking. However, he had more than looks, for his painting, "Breton Peasants," had been honored in Paris, and created a stir in art circles there.

I crossed the room to meet him. He offered the roses without saying anything, which was his way sometimes.

Getting a jar, I began to fix the lovely blossoms, while he wandered restlessly around the room. He stopped in front of a landscape on the wall, bright with a glory of sunset clouds.

It was the one bit of Father's work that Mother had clung to through all her deprivations.

"Your father was a great artist," said Dustan; "why didn't the world hear more about him?"

"He hadn't time to develop," I answered. "He died at fifty without having been sure of his own genius. He had wonderful visions, but they were swamped by the necessity of earning a living for his family." I spoke bitterly, for I had worshiped my father, and felt keenly the hard injustice of his failure to win recognition.

Dustan turned quickly. "That is what you are going to do, if you insist on carrying out this mad ranch project."

"I don't feel that way. I'm only letting go for five years, and then I'll be in a position to study art seriously. And —"

"You're just wasting five years," he interrupted coming to my side. "Marry me now, and keep right on studying."

"That's exactly what I can't do, Dustan." I shook my head. "There's Paul. I must think of him."

"Oh, Paul!" he echoed angrily. "Why must you forever be thinking of Paul? He's —"

The studio door burst open, and Elsie Stein came racketing in, with Paul and all the rest of the bunch at her exaggerated French heels,

their arms full of bundles, prepared to have a feed.

I know that I showed relief in my face for Dustan turned away, hurt, and wouldn't stay, though we all begged him.

His sister Serena's indolent blue eyes took in the situation, I knew, for after he had gone she came into the kitchenette where I was lighting the gas, and began talking about "poor, impulsive Dustan," meanwhile watching me out of the slant of her eyes. Serena was fair, not much for good looks and had to wear reducing corsets. (She found it awfully hard to forgive me my figure.) She was sort of a "Baby Vamp," and considered herself an artist; but even Dustan was just polite over her unspeakable daubs. I positively hated her, and for the life of me, I couldn't tell, half the time, whether she was trying to be pleasant or disagreeable.

In my present confusion I got reckless with the salad oil, and splashed some on the front of her henna silk. Of course I was awfully sorry and offered her the gasoline bottle, but she went out, and I heard the girls exclaiming over the catastrophe.

CHAPTER IV

SOME FARMERS AND SOME FARMS

As I had written to Francis Boalt when Paul's vacation came, we would then come up and take a look at the ranch, we therefor got ready and started.

The cold fog was searching for our bones as we caught an early morning train at the Mole. Dustan met us there with a lot of flowers, candy and magazines for me. He begged us to excuse Serena for not coming, it was so early.

I didn't tell him that Serena pleased me more by staying at home, and nobody ever thought of seeing her since she was never up before eleven. I thanked him for the roses and things, and felt grateful for his warm hand-clasp at the last minute, because it seemed to me I was being cast out into an unknown land.

I saw his serious face for a long time as we traveled northward, hour after hour. Noon came, and we were still running across a level land of varying greens and browns, of shorn hayfields, orchards, beans or rice fields. It grew terribly hot and the dust set Paul to coughing, so that the people turned their heads

to stare. I hadn't realized before how tired and ill he looked.

Beyond Sacramento a timid, drab little woman and child got on, and sat across the aisle from us. She wore an ill-made gray poplin and a pitiful looking hat of the same cloth. Her gnarled, red hands were ungloved.

I couldn't keep my eyes away from her hands; they looked so discouraged like her hat; and I'm sure the knuckle of her third finger was larger than the wedding ring encircling it.

She carried a lot of clumsy bundles which she tried, unsuccessfully, to put in the rack. Paul got up and put them in for her.

She flushed all over her thin freckled face, and thanked him with a sort of humble gratitude. The little girl looked at Paul, wide-eyed. When I gave her some candy, she began talking eagerly telling me that her hat was brand new. She took it off to show me, a cheap white straw with a bunch of blue cornflowers.

After a while Paul went into the smoker, and the woman began talking. After she had told me that she lived on a farm, I felt personally interested in her, and told her that I too, was going to my ranch.

She laughed as though I had said something

funny, and I saw that she didn't believe me. When I convinced her that I was really serious, she looked me over doubtfully and said: "I don't think you'll stay there." She went on telling me a lot of things which made me think things hadn't changed much since Mother's time.

Finally we approached a straggly, dust-grimed town which she said was her station.

Paul, who had returned, got her things down for her.

She thanked him with more assurance this time, and told me if I ever came to her town to come and see her, which I promised to do. As the train slowed down, she looked out of the window and said:

"Why, there's Papa now, with the car. It must have run good today."

I glanced out also, and saw a decrepit Ford which I should say, had run itself out of breath, by the way it shivered and wheezed. The back part was loaded with bundles and sacks of something. In front a square can oozed oil, and on the running board was a coop or crate such as one sees in the fowl markets.

Behind the wheel sat a small, lean man unshaven, in bib overalls and a dusty black hat. He got out to meet his folks.

She left one of her bundles on the seat, so

Paul hastened after her with it. Taking it nervously, she said "Goodbye" again. As she turned to receive Papa's bristly kiss, she said anxiously:

"What made you have to buy chicken feed again right away?"

And he asked: "Who's your swell friend, Mama?"

When Paul returned and sat down, I remarked, indicating Papa who was absorbed in getting Lizzie under way:

"See yourself in the future, Paul — a farmer."

Paul glanced out of the window and back again at me, whimsically.

"What about you and Mama, Puss?"

I clutched his arm spasmodically. "Oh Paul! Let's turn right around and go back."

After hours longer we pulled into our destination, the town of Maples. There were a few bright leaved maples growing by the station, and one wide, hot street running through the center of the town. It looked a tidy little place, but sleepy and dull in the blistering July sun. We had expected to be in the mountains, but there were just low brown hills dotted with scrubby oaks.

It was our first introduction to Northern California, and it seemed so different from the

other portions I knew, that I felt when Paul offered our checks, to the Station Agent that he ought to reply in a foreign language.

No especial use for checks. Our two suitcases were in plain sight on a truck with no other baggage about.

Paul asked for a taxi. The man gripped a suspender of his bib overalls in each hand and after some cogitation, obligingly said he'd telephone to old Potter and ask if his Ford was out.

While we waited, a handsome Cadillac came purring up the street, driven by a charming young girl. Her red gold hair made a sort of glory around her uncovered head, even in the shade of the car. As she turned her machine with a graceful sweep, I saw her glance at Paul, and keen interest flashed into her face before she passed out of our range of vision.

Paul saw it too, and we looked after her down the street. A dingy Overland met her. The drivers saluted.

"Some car!" said Paul. But I knew he meant "some girl!" "That's the kind of a car we ought to get."

"We will when our cucumber trees come into bearing," I promised, as the Overland slid up in front of us and stopped.

The driver got out and came toward us. It

was Francis Boalt with a smile of welcome on his plain face. He had come to meet us, and made profuse apologies for being late — a blow-out; and he apologized again for his dirty hands as I presented Paul.

He shook hands heartily. I saw Paul wince, and my own fingers stung from the warmth of his greeting.

Saying that it must have been very warm coming up, he swung the suitcases into the car and opened the front door for me. He glanced at Paul who had started to cough again.

“ I trust those things won't crowd you? ” he said.

“ Not at all, ” Paul answered and got into the back seat.

In a few minutes we were far beyond the fifteen mile limit sign and out on the country road. It was hot, and a passing car driven by an awfully common looking man, dodged in front of us, and the dust rolled up in a choking tan fog around us, nearly smothering us.

Mr. Boalt slowed down with the remark that the roads were getting dusty. The other car passed out of sight and the dust cleared. Soon the cool shadows began to creep across the plain that stretched between us and the timber line where our road apparently ended.

Our host turned to Paul to point out far

famed Lassen, a blunt, reddish cone with a white streak of snow down one side and a gauzy veil of white mist across the summit. The attendant mountains, Bally and Broke Off Butte, and lesser peaks clustered near like a queen's tiring maids.

"Is it going now?" asked Paul, leaning to get a better view.

"Possibly and possibly not. That looks like a cloud; but there is no knowing at what minute it may become a serious eruption. There's Mount Shasta to the left. It's our pride."

I turned my head. The great snow-white monument of the ages stood back, aloof, behind flat blue mountains, cool and pale in the evening's gathering shadows like a god appearing for a brief moment upon Olympic heights.

It was difficult to realize that it was a solid mass of granite, it looked so illusive and ethereal like moonlit fog. If it had faded and vanished before my eyes, I should not have felt the least surprise. But it remained there. The delicate blue shadows appeared in the crevasses, and the warm glow of sunset tinged the snow to pink.

I lost it after we slid down a long curving hill and passed between broad green fields of alfalfa, where sheep and hogs stood half submerged in the sweet scented billows.

Here the Cadillac and its lovely driver went by us. An elderly man with close trimmed gray beard sat beside her. She tooted merrily as she passed, and I'm sure her gay nod was for me. I couldn't help smiling and waving my hand in return.

"Miss Celia Hilyard and her father," explained Francis Boalt as the car rapidly diminished in the distance. "They live here."

He went on with quite a lot of information about them. It seemed that they were not real farmers, Mr. Hilyard having made money in mines. But they enjoyed the country, and spent a portion of the year on their ranch. They would perhaps, stay the winter.

This topic was cut short because, quite suddenly, we rolled over a long bridge, and the gleaming Sacramento River lay beneath us, reflecting the evening sky in a gigantic mirror. To the left, far up stream where the river curved, Shasta appeared again, blushing rose red.

I turned to Paul. "Paul! Isn't this wonderful? Beautiful! Oh, please, Mr. Boalt, drive slowly."

I twisted my head to the right and to the left as we passed over.

To the left, the majestic silver stream moved slowly between curving red banks, lined with splotches of verdure. Below us, it spread out

smooth as ice, reflecting the opaline tints of the sunset, deep, deep as the heavens are high, and framed in oaks, and willows of glistening green.

Farther down, a ripple disturbed the reflection, the stream divided to flow around an island of gray gravel; and above the bend of the river bank, in the distance, rose three round blue-green mounds.

We left the river and drove around a range of low, rolling hills, white with dry grass burned by successive days of hot sunshine. Yet the barren landscape was relieved by trees, and more trees, green and fresh as if newly laundered. In the fields to the right, groups of kingly oaks sheltered red and white cattle from the too fervid heat.

Nearing the end of the lane, we stopped at a gate where a tall white house showed through the trees.

"I'm taking you to my house," said Francis Boalt. "Mary is expecting us to supper."

I supposed, of course, that Mary was his wife; but it turned out that the smiling creature of vast dimensions who came to the door wiping her hands on her gingham apron, was his housekeeper, Mary Marks.

She took us under her broad wing, like a nice old Plymouth Rock hen. I could almost

hear her cluck as she bustled about us; taking my wraps, setting a chair for Francis Boalt, and hastening after some home-made hoarhound lozenges for Paul's cough.

Mr. Boalt's place was beautiful. A big, old-fashioned house, roomy and comfortable, set in the midst of the loveliest grove of oaks. His father had owned the place before him. His parents had both died there, and his wife also. He had one son, Timothy Boalt, who had been born there, but was now a rising lawyer in Chicago.

Mr. Boalt invited us to remain as his guests, and the next day he took us over to our own place, which was some three miles farther up Beckwith Creek.

I must say our place was something of a shock to me when we stopped at the gate. The old house, a stranger to paint, sort of slouched in the middle of what had been a huge garden. But now it was all choked with weeds, and most of the shrubbery dead. One straggling oleander bravely flourished its rose colored blossoms, and some of the roses were still a rusty green. For the rest, there was nothing but stickery weeds as high as my waist.

The long, low house had been well built, but the porches were tumbling, and the roof leaked. Only the kitchen part was habitable. This was

where Uncle Nat had lived the three years since Aunt Miriam's death, with one old man, Alfred Cross, who remained there and took care of the cows.

The barns were in better condition, and there were beautiful trees everywhere; great oaks and walnuts whose gnarled branches swept through cathedral-like arches and touched the ground; or lifted like emerald wings of Inspiration, moving gently against the clear blue of the sky.

There were fine pastures too, farther away from the house, knee deep with alfalfa, green as a park and dotted with purple bloom. Here we found Mr. Cross who turned at Francis Boalt's halloo and, seeing us, started toward us with a muddy shovel on his shoulder, and splashed up to the road in his rubber boots.

"He's irrigating," explained Francis Boalt, indicating the fields of young corn which seemed all afloat from the great ditches booming along bank-full, at one side.

Mr. Cross approached the car slowly, stopping at intervals to adjust the rivulets between the corn rows. Evidently he didn't consider us of any great importance. He came within speaking distance at last; a weazened little old man with a long upper lip. He squinted at us inquiringly from mild brown eyes.

“Humph, that you, Francis?” he asked by way of greeting.

Mr. Boalt didn’t deny it. He presented Paul and me.

Mr. Cross nodded his tattered straw hat and said, “Pleased to meet you,” and gave us both a good “once over.” He passed Paul up, but said that I favored Uncle Nat, only I was some better looking! Then he wanted to know what I thought of the ranch.

“Seems very nice,” I said. “Lovely fields.”

He stuck the shovel upright in the black soil, pushing it in deep with his boot, and asked if we wanted to get out and look around.

Of course we did. We got out of the car, and skirting the irrigated areas — for the water seemed to be everywhere in tawny pools and streams, we followed our leader to the cow pasture.

There were a lot of cows, sleek, placid creatures with red and white skins and enormous udders; and one lordly white bull which might easily have been a lineal descendant of Raghorn, the snow white bull on which Priscilla rode like a queen to her wedding.

“His name is Raghorn,” I said to Paul.

They all wandered about aimlessly cropping the green, or lay lazily in the sunshine chewing, chewing like flappers at a matinee.

Mr. Cross led us to another pasture where the calves, cunning little replicas of the mothers, and the young heifers, which seemed to be a cross between a cow and a calf, took alarm at our appearance, and ran wildly to the extreme end of the lot where two sorrel horses grazed. In the field adjoining were perhaps a dozen horses that took alarm from the upraised head of a dark bay, and all galloped to the far side of the field, then wheeled and faced us, snorting like Pegasus.

"They ain't much used to women folks," said Mr. Cross. "Do y' like dogs?" he asked suddenly.

"We're crazy about them," I said.

He whistled, and a black long-haired dog came leaping out of the corn field. It stopped and looked at Paul and me.

"What breed is he?" asked Paul.

"Half shepherd," said Mr. Cross promptly; "and half Scotch Coaly."

Paul looked a little puzzled until Francis Boalt remarked that the Scotch *Collie* was a very intelligent dog. Then he turned to me and began to enthuse over the beauty and full-hearted serenity of farm life, the peace and quiet of the fields.

"Yes, it's quiet," said I, for the silence was already pressing on me, as if I were down a

well or up in a balloon. Everything was still, yet quivering with an intangible pulse, perhaps it was the striving of the earth itself. I suggested that we go.

Mary had dinner ready when we got back to Francis Boalt's home. And there was a new equation in the shape of a colorless, white haired young man, whom our host introduced as Mr. Carmichael.

At first I really thought he was somebody, the way he rose and shook hands with quite a manner, and his accent at once stamped him as English. But he turned out to be the hired man, and that explained his muddy boots at dinner. Fancy, shaking hands with the hired man!

During the meal Francis Boalt told us all about the country. How it was an awfully old settled section, where nearly everybody had lived and raised their families, and lost them to the "city's wiles" (I quote Francis Boalt). And now the old people sat tight, and held the land until the time when the young blood should come back.

To our dismay we learned that the young people had nearly all gone. But the families were a splendid class of fine, respectable people, excellent neighbors, and upright, estimable citizens.

I nodded my head at my host, and shot a

glance at Paul. "Excellent neighbors" and "estimable citizens" didn't sound very exhilarating!

Paul listened with polite attention to Mary, who sat opposite Francis Boalt. Her moon face shone with kindness as she told Paul about her twin sister, Martha, and how devoted they had always been to each other.

Mr. Carmichael sat silent, eating busily. Once he looked up and I happened to catch his eye. He blushed furiously, concluded his meal, and with a murmured excuse, rose and tramped out in his clumsy boots.

Francis Boalt continued: about Uncle Nat and my end of the game. There were but two restrictions laid on me. I could never mortgage the land beyond a certain sum, and I must remain single during the five years.

"And suppose I do not?" I said, because I always liked to know exactly where I stood.

"In that case," Mr. Boalt hesitated over Uncle Nat's ultimatum; "the property will be sold, and the proceeds given to the Odd Fellows' Home, of which lodge your uncle died a member."

Paul turned and spoke up sharply, showing that he wasn't as absorbed in Mary's twin as he seemed. "I think we'd have a perfect right to contest such a will."

Mr. Boalt regarded him somewhat austerely. "You could do so," he said: "but it would be of no advantage to you. There is no flaw in the will, I drew it up myself. It provides a small legacy for each of you, which protects it from attack."

"Of course we should never think of doing that," I said quickly, surprised and annoyed at the stand Paul had taken. "Uncle Nat's wishes will be respected and carried out to the best of my ability."

CHAPTER V

GETTING CIVILIZED

We bade Mr. Boalt and Mary goodbye the next day and returned to the City. Anxious to begin our farming, we wound up our affairs there and came back to the ranch about the middle of August.

It was hotter than July, if possible, and the harvests were in full blast. The roads, deep with dust, were alive with hurrying cars, and trucks loaded with house-high stacks of boxes and trays for the fruit drying; with hay, machinery, or roughly dressed harvest hands.

The laden orchards were breaking under their weight of fruit, and the fields were dotted with enormous haystacks, and teeming with harvest paraphernalia.

Surely it was the land of abundance.

On my own ranch there were similar activities, on a smaller scale. Yet as I gazed at my fertile acres, lush with alfalfa and young corn, I felt thrilled to be a part of all this business of the soil. I too, was a land baron.

There was undoubtedly plenty to be done before we could live at the ranch, for the house

wasn't habitable. Francis Boalt invited us to stay at his home until we could get our place ready.

We didn't waste any time. Uncle Nat had left a respectable bank account for a starter. Considerate old man! When I thought of him, I felt guilty that we had done so little for him in his last, lonely years. But it couldn't be helped now. The only thing to do was to respect his wishes, and carry them out to the best of my ability.

I wanted to learn all I could from observation, so with this idea in view, we accepted Francis Boalt's invitation to drive through and see the country at large. The beauty of the valley struck me anew. Shasta and Lassen looked down on us from the right and left, and far blue hills encircled the valley, making it like a great round bowl.

Everywhere there were trees, noble, broad-armed oaks and white-boled sycamores draped with wild grape and glistening poison ivy. In another section, odorous pines and scrubby oaks burdened with mistletoe dotted the hills. Creeks and ditches of clear blue water were there; though this, for the most part seemed idle, for many of the fields were bare and brown.

"Can't this water be used?" I asked.

"Yes." I caught in his answer a note of ex-

cuse rather than an affirmative. "It will be used more and more."

He named the ranches as we passed. I looked and listened. Most of the homes were unlovely and neglected. I saw ill-dressed women doing various kinds of manual labor in the yards. And yet Francis Boalt said there was a great deal of money here.

I laughed shortly. "Wealthy men! And such homes? We see such in the outskirts of the city sometimes where they keep a goat, or the ashman's cart stands in front of the door."

His face reddened under my scathing criticism. I had totally over-looked the fact that these people were his friends and neighbors. He sought to defend them by saying that a great many of the ranches did not pay.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Principally because we need young blood," said Francis Boalt almost sadly. "Young blood and new blood; blood with the hope and strength and courage to attack the land along new lines. We who hold the land now are tired. It is waiting for a new era, a new generation. Our fathers wrested it from the wilderness, from the hand of the savage and the teeth of the grizzly bear as far back as 1846. This is the oldest settlement north of Sutter's Fort. My problems were different from my father's,

as the problem the land presents now is different from that of two decades ago. The land," he continued; "is now sick, as Agriculture is sick, because the new generation in this time of rush and hurry, is not willing to submit to the slow movement of the soil; not patient under its demands. In short, the fighting blood of the present generation wants to conquer by the assault of pitched-battle; but the soil only yields to the long intelligently laid siege."

I groped, rather, for his meaning. It sounded hard, awfully hard.

"Perhaps," I ventured; "it is as my father used to say, they need a vision."

"The soil is a dual thing," he continued along his own line of thought. "It must be regarded as a friend, yet conquered as an enemy; for, like all primitive things, even the primal instincts that still cling to our civilization, it must recognize and yield to force before it will react to persuasion."

I was really awfully impressed by his analysis of the force against which I had had the temerity to pit my feeble strength and wit, but Paul was patently bored. He interrupted with:

"Gee! There's a good looking skirt. I began to think there wasn't any here."

We had just descended a long wooded hill.

At the bottom a small clearing held a rough board house. The ground about it was bare and dusty. Three lean shoats lay and grunted under the live oak shade, and a young girl in white, coquetted with a gawky, gum-chewing youth astride a roan horse.

She lifted her face, pretty as a wild pansy, and nodded as we passed.

Francis Boalt lifted his hat sedately, as became an elderly gentleman. But she wasn't looking at him; she was looking at Paul.

"It's Miss Lucy Graham," explained Mr. Boalt indifferently. "The Grahams are a poor family which has moved here recently. There are three boys and Mr. Graham."

We drove on in silence for a mile. Somehow I couldn't help thinking about that girl. It was such a lonely, out-of-the-way place for one girl and no other woman near.

"Were you born to ranching, Mr. Boalt?" I asked to resume the conversation; "or did you achieve it, or was it thrust upon you?"

"All three," he smiled. "I was born on a farm, but I left it for many years while I practiced law. Yet much of my legal business has pertained to the land. Eight years ago I came back, for I want to hold the land for my son."

"Does he want it?" I asked bluntly, as we stopped at his gate.

“ Can you doubt it, Miss Torrell? ” Francis Boalt indicated with his still scholarly hand, his broad pastures, his shorn stubble fields, his laden orchards. “ He is of the land; he’ll come back to it eventually.” He got out, slammed the car door decisively, and went to open the gate.

“ I imagine it! ” I remarked to Paul. Mary had showed me a picture of Timothy Boalt — class all over him — and told me about his successful law practice in Chicago. “ I see him here on the ranch grubbing up the weeds in the front yard, and carrying slop to the pigs, as I saw Mr. Boalt doing this morning.”

“ Sure thing! ” laughed Paul, as Mr. Boalt returned to the car. Then Paul remembered his manners and got out to shut the gate after we had passed through.

That evening at dinner Mr. Carmichael had assumed a clean shirt and his coat, because it was Sunday, I suppose; and to my amazement, began to address his conversation to me.

Paul looked him up and down, but Mr. Boalt seemed to take it perfectly all right, so I was forced to be civil.

He too, began talking about the land, its reach and scope and stability; its bounty, and influence on civilization. Curious conversation for a hired man! I wondered where he got it.

“ And of course you are familiar with its influence on your American Educational system, and religious foundation? ”

“ I’ve never heard it discussed,” I said, all at sea.

He went on to tell me about “ The Great Stake,” and when and which states set aside portions of their lands for educational and religious purposes, and about Benjamin Simms of Virginia who gave “ two hundred acres of land, with the milk and increase of eight cows, for the maintenance of a free school for the children of Elizabeth City and Kiquotan parishes.” There was a lot more about land grants, etc. I had never heard of it before. He must have been studying up to impress people!

I didn’t say much because I was getting fed up on the virtues and attributes of the land; and the idiosyncrasies of the soil. I was glad when we swallowed the last mouthful of Mary’s delicious pudding and got up from the table. I offered to help Mary wash dishes, and Mr. Carmichael went to play the Victrola for Paul.

In the kitchen, Mary told me if I wanted to get somebody to help me her sister Martha would like a job. She was anxious to get out into the country for a while. Also, she told me a lot of interesting things about Mr. Carmichael. It seemed he wasn’t exactly a hired

man, but was out here from England to learn agriculture. He was the sixth son of the Earl of Derran, and though he had very little chance of succeeding to the title, he had hope of a legacy from an aunt. Well, of course that showed Mr. Carmichael in a new light, and explained his learned conversation.

“Mr. Boalt wants Tim to come back here, and he and Mr. Carmichael take over the ranch” continued Mary, scraping a pot viciously; “but he don’t want to. It’s too bad the young folks won’t stay on the farms.”

Goodness! Mary was getting started.

She went on to tell me that Mr. and Mrs. Arpsbagger, on my left, had a son cruising around somewhere, for whom they were keeping their place. And Mr. and Mrs. Cattman on my right, had Mrs. Cattman’s daughter Norah, who had a Marinella shop in New York, and they were holding on for her.

I remarked that I supposed when Nonie got tired of New York, she could come and set up a Beauty Parlor on the Beckwith.

Mary wasn’t without a sense of humor. She cackled fatly, finished things up, and we went into the living room to listen to the Victrola. But after I went to my room, I reviewed all that she had said. Just so, I suppose, Uncle Nat had dreamed.

Next day being Monday, I decided to begin work on my place. I'd got one thing out of my survey of the country side. Clean up, Pick up, and Dig up! was my slogan.

I began to vision what sort of a place I wanted for a home, and I saw how we could accomplish it. If I was to be sacrificed to the lust of the land for young blood, I must have something to show for it.

The house, which was long and low, something of the Bungalow type, suited me all right. There was only to re-roof it, fix the porches, and furbish up the inside.

We got a crew of carpenters and painters and I revelled in the sound of saw and hammer, the newness of fresh paint, and the importance of being consulted a hundred times a day about steps, windows, partitions, closets, and everything. I knew just what I wanted, and I must say the workmen were very nice, fixing all things according to my desires.

I sent for Martha, who was a fat replica of Mary, to cook for this bunch of men. I also sent to the city for a landscape gardener, and I'll tell you the country people gasped when that terrible weed-cursed inclosure began to put on the graces of civilization. I had the old out-buildings torn down, the whole place regraded from the high ground back of the house

to the half circle of enormous oaks, and the running stream at the foot.

Of course the house was in the wrong place, but Mr. Pellier got around that cleverly, by connecting a great oak behind it with tall shrubbery, all ready to set in, which we had sent up from the city.

A broad drive of white brick ran by the house down to the water's edge with a space to turn a car, and also where I could have chairs, hammocks and tea tables under the spread of a wonderful oak.

He left space for a cunning rock garage, for there were loads of cobble stones about, and planted the whole inclosure to trees and shrubs just in the right places.

It was lovely. Every day some of the farmer folk drifted by or stopped in to stare and comment. The editors of the country newspapers came out and wrote us up, and said we were just what the country needed for its progress.

But I must admit the gray-beards shook their heads solemnly and said that it was too bad to waste old Manheim's money in foolishness; we'd last quick, etc. I didn't let any of it bother me; in fact, I enjoyed it. And Paul said it would do the hicks good to be waked up! "And see what 'vision' can do for people," I added.

At last Mr. Pellier finished, modestly accepted my glowing thanks (said it had been a very great pleasure to him), and presented his bill.

I ran my eyes down the items, trees, tools, shrubs, plans, etc., to the total — the frightful total!

My knees went weak. I toppled over on a handsome rustic bench. Honestly I was unable to stand! I realized with an awful dryness in my throat why farmers didn't have visions habitually!

Well, after the first shock was over, I began to revive. It was the show place of the country side, and it would be lovely to entertain the Bunch here. They were all invited to come as soon as we got things habitable. We got a good looking Nash car. Saddle horses had gone out of style in the country. Nobody rode except Indians, for pleasure, I mean. Everybody had cars, and besides we didn't find anybody giving horses away. We bought one from Mr. Cattman, for Paul to ride about the farm. Mr. Boalt said it was an "old skate," and we'd been shamefully imposed on as to price, but we didn't find that out until afterwards. Anyhow, we felt that we were getting started.

CHAPTER VI

SERIOUS FARMING AND NEW YEAR GREETINGS FROM THE TRADESPEOPLE

It wasn't until the last of September that Paul and I went seriously to farming. We got some heavy boots and good looking shade hats, and had our picture taken with the horse and the two Airedales. We looked like farmers all right.

Mr. Boalt told us about Farmer's Bulletins we could get just for the asking, about all sorts of things, and gave us a list to choose from. It must be the farmer's fault if he doesn't make money when the Government tells him exactly how to do everything.

We got a lot, and they looked awfully interesting, with pictures and all. I read one aloud to Paul. We decided to save the rest until the long winter evenings came.

Paul fixed a nice shelf for them beside the fireplace and we piled them up in neat piles, feeling just like real farmers.

The one I read was all about Mad Itch in cattle. Poor things! It said that their sufferings were intense. I got quite worried for fear

our dairy cows might have it, for I hadn't examined them very closely. I asked Mr. Cross about it, and he said, "Dad Burn it, no! What put such a fool idee in your head?"

I didn't consider it a proper way for an employee to speak. I said in a very dignified way: "It is entirely possible, Mr. Cross. Please take every precaution. And if you see *any* indication, prompt attention is imperative. That is what this bulletin says." I gave it to him, and I think he must have watched them, for I never heard of any of them having it. He was a very faithful old man.

There wasn't anything to do at this time of the year, on the ranch, except keep the silo corn hoed and irrigated, cut the milo, dig the late potatoes, gather in the apples and pumpkins; except, of course, the milking and "chores," and little things like hauling in the winter's wood and cleaning up the barnyards, and taking care of the shrubbery and grass around the house, so we decided we might as well take a week off. I asked Mr. Cross if he thought he could spare us.

He was awfully nice, and said: "Easier than not I reckon. Trot right along." We felt perfectly safe in leaving him. It seemed that Uncle Nat had trusted him implicitly.

We drove down to the city in the car, stayed

a week, and had a splendid time. We brought half a dozen of the Bunch back with us, including Dusty; — Serena was in St. Louis, for which I was devoutly thankful.

They all just went crazy over the ranch. Jimmy Prague said he had always intended to marry a ranch, and proposed to me before dinner.

I said: "I'll have to wait and see how my crops turn out." I had learned, already, that no farmer ever decides anything until he is absolutely settled as to the vagaries of his crop yield.

The girls were just as wild over it; there were so many things to paint and sketch. Everywhere you went, during the next week, somebody's easel was propped up; and the house reeked with the smell of paint, turpentine and fixatif.

Dustan began to search for a "peasant" type. I suggested the man that Mr. Cross had hired in our absence, but Dusty said he looked too hangdog.

He was a queer looking object, and dear me! I took Mr. Cross to task about him; I said:

"It's *impossible* to keep a man like that, Mr. Cross. He's *shamefully* dirty."

Mr. Cross wanted to know what that had to do with it.

“*Everything*,” I said. “Why — he — he —” I stammered over the literal truth; “he *smells* so!”

Mr. Cross pursed out his lips. “Well, I’ll tell you, Miss Torrel; he’s a good worker. You ain’t been at the game long enough to know that workin’ is a lot more important than smellin’ in a hired man.”

I was so indignant. I said decisively:

“Well, he’ll either have to be dismissed — or — laundered.”

Mr. Cross pursed out his lips again, but he didn’t presume to say any more. At lunch the man had on a clean shirt which didn’t altogether make him a la France, but he offended the eye less.

Martha, who had proved herself more than satisfactory, had a letter from her daughter who was ill and wanted her to come; so I let her go for a fortnight. It was unfortunate, but everybody said we could get on. We just bivouacked, getting canned things, bread and fresh meat from town, by going after it. It was really more fun than having regular meals, but that ridiculous hired man got sulky and threatened to leave unless he had regular meals.

I said to Mr. Cross, “Very well; let him quit.” The idea, of my having to be dictated to by a repulsive hired man!

Mr. Cross looked at me for a minute, but he saw I was not to be trifled with. "He's a durn good worker," he said. As if that was a mantle of charity to cover all sins! After a little, he said if I didn't mind, he'd cook for the man and himself in the bunk house until my company left.

Mind! I told Mr. Cross his initiative made him doubly valuable to me, and to let me know anything he wanted me to get for him.

He answered respectfully enough. He was a faithful, good old man.

Later Dustan came in, much amused, and told me he had heard my manager say to the hired man that they'd cook and eat sensible in the bunk house until that dam-fool bunch left. "Why the idea! Dustan, the very idea!" I said. "Mr. Cross has always been *such* a nice old man."

Dustan laughed and laughed, and seemed to think Mr. Cross a great sport, and afterwards took all sorts of pains to make friends with him.

Things were much more comfortable with the two men gone from the table, and my not having to think about them all the time, which was a strain, I tell you!

We picnicked, motored, rowed on the river, danced and had private theatricals, and feeds,

and explored the country. We had an indescribable time! Paul and I decided we'd never want to sell the ranch. No wonder people were crazy over farming!

Francis Boalt asked us all over there, and we had the run of his big house. They all fell in love with Mary and her hot biscuits, and of course, I explained about Mr. Carmichael and his prospects.

We did something every night, for there were two weeks of the most enchanting moonlight, which made the broad expanse of the Sacramento River a perfect dream of beauty. Of course it was all as mild as could be, and perfectly proper, but we scandalized the whole estimable country-side by our midnight frolics. Even Francis Boalt's impregnable reputation was almost overthrown by association.

I found this out later. Also, that respectable farm folk have certain stated forms of amusement of which they approve, and all other enjoyments are of a questionable character.

Well, it all had to end. They went home. Martha came back, and Paul and I resumed our farming.

I was glad to see Martha back again. We grew fond of her in a very short time. She was lots like Mary, except that Mary had remained *almost* a celibate (her *one* husband proving to

have a living wife, but nobody blamed Mary). Martha had had three husbands, all of whom had obligingly died. This three-fold grief had not stopped her comfortable laugh, nor her capacity to turn off work. She was a motherly creature, and called Paul and me, "Children." It sounded good to me. I had borne the brunt of things ever since Mother's death.

Mr. Cross and the odorous man decided quite of their own accord to quit "batching" as they called it. I intended to speak to Mr. Cross about it as not having them around was so much nicer. But Martha said it wouldn't do. Hired men always expected to eat in the house, and everyone else let them, so I had to abandon the idea. I don't think he *ever* changed his shirt again! I mean the hired man.

The autumn progressed, wonderful in a thousand ways. Such long, quiet days of mellow charm; soft, dreamy evening twilights, and cool mornings crisp with a tang Francis Boalt called "fall." I painted and sketched to my heart's content, and Paul had his music. But he liked best to be out of doors. He scoured around the country on his horse, grew brown and almost lost his cough. The hills were alive with long-eared jack rabbits, which nobody cared anything about, but the Airedales took to them like ducks to water. Paul spent half

his time coursing with them over the rough hills.

It was fine, until Mr. Cross' dog began to go too, and then Mr. Cross, who had always been nice to Paul, got so *furious* and swore in the most disrespectful manner at him.

It bowled Paul right over. He hadn't asked the silly dog to go.

I heard it, and I walked right out there, about as angry as Mr. Cross.

I said: "Mr. Cross, you can pack your effects and leave — immediately."

He looked at me, so amazed, and rolled his tobacco into his other cheek. Then he screwed his mouth around and stuck out his lips, and said:

"Now see here, Miss Torrel. Them two Airydales is just good-to-look-at dogs, and the further they are off, the better they look to me. I ain't goin' to have 'em teachin' Shep to go rammin' around after jack rabbits. He's a dern good dog, and they ain't wuth the salt it 'ud take to keep 'em from spilin'. I'm goin' to put a stop to it."

I regarded him haughtily. "Please remember, Mr. Cross —"

"Now, now! Shet up! I ain't agoin' to leave. I'm goin' to stay right here. I can see you're a Manheim, and the farm's yours; but

you're jest a baby what don't know sic 'em about what you're doin'. Old Nat said you'd be bossy and hardheaded, likely; but I promised him I'd see you through if I could. But if them two whiskered cusses toll Shep off again, I'll git my shot gun. Now, you'd better git in the house outin this hot sun, or you'll git sunstroke."

He turned and trudged off with his halting gait, and I went meekly back into the house, so squelched that I never thought of replying.

Paul stormed, and called Mr. Cross "an interfering old fool"; but after I thought it over, I was entirely in sympathy with him, and so thankful he was a man of his word. So Uncle Nat had foreseen that I was likely to steer up against troubles? Neither had he forgotten that the Manheims were hardheaded!

The silo had to be filled in October, so, as we knew things would be messy and uncomfortable with a lot of men about, we ran down to the city until it should be over.

We stayed into November and got home just before it began to rain. I never saw such ridiculous weather: rain, mud and slush, and terrific winds blowing. You couldn't step out, and the roads were fearful! We nearly went crazy.

Mr. Arpsbagger, who stopped at the house once or twice, said it was likely to be a wet winter, but that was fine, for the country needed water. It certainly got it. We couldn't stand it, so we escaped from it for Thanksgiving and Christmas; but we were so cross that it snowed while we were away; neither of us had ever seen a snow storm.

Martha wrote too, that Celia Hilyard, who had been away all fall, came home Christmas time, and during that week, called on me. That was provoking too. None of the neighbor women had bothered their heads about me. I had always heard that the country people were so friendly, but not one of the neighborhood matrons had darkened our doorway, so far.

Lucy Graham came once, but she struck me about like the "Airydales": "good to look at," and that was all. She giggled a great deal, and made eyes at Paul, and told me maybe I might "catch" Francis Boalt.

I wasn't sorry when she went home. Francis Boalt and Mr. Carmichael were our most frequent visitors and I suppose every time they came, everybody in the country knew it. Well, we should worry about it!

We intended to come home from the city directly after Christmas, but there was a most

exceptional Art Exhibition and some unusual musical shows, that we felt we ought to stay for. Although we were farmers, we decided it was foolish to lose touch with the world. Added to all this, there was Pinky Crawford and Jimmy Prague's wedding. They had come to an understanding when they were up at the ranch, so we *had* to stay for that.

It was February when we, at last got home and Mr. Cross had the ranch, except the pastures, of course, all torn up with what he called "spring plowing." The fields were lovely; rich and brown like great breadths of wide wale velvet corduroy, for a giant's coat. It seemed that had to be done every winter to plant grain for hay.

Mr. Cross said that he and the odorous hired man had done it all. He added that farmers had to look out and keep expenses down. I commended him and told him that I heartily agreed with him.

After dinner, or supper, as I had to teach myself to say, for ranch dinner meant the noon meal, we sat down by the fireplace. It was cosy and warm inside, but so quiet. Outside, it was awfully cold, and so still and dark. No lights nor hum of motors, no clang of cars, nor tread of busy feet, just dim starlight and a dog barking some place.

Paul went right off to sleep in his chair, for we had had rather a strenuous few weeks, but I sat there trying to read.

Martha came in with a pasteboard box, her sleeves rolled above her plump elbows. "You look mighty cosy in here," she said; "I suppose you're glad to get home again."

"Oh, surely," I lied glibly, because I was just then traitorously wishing that I had yielded to Dustan's plea to retire in favor of the indigent Odd Fellows.

Martha beamed, and gave me the box full of letters.

I took it listlessly. "Holiday greetings from the shops and trades people," I said. I picked up a handful and began tearing them open. They were New Year greetings, all right, and each one suggested an early remittance!

They made me feel queer. I hadn't ever been used to charge accounts, but everyone had been so anxious to oblige Nathaniel Mannheim's niece, and it was awfully handy.

The bills were staggering, but I got out my checkbook and wrote a check for every one.

Martha lingered and said she'd like some money, her daughter was ill.

"Why, certainly, Martha," I assured her; "any time you want money, say so." I wrote her a check.

The next day Mr. Cross said the man wanted to quit. His time was so and so, at so much per day. And he'd drawn for a pair of shoes, overalls, and tobacco to such an amount.

I wrote a check for an appalling sum just for that smelly hired man. I hoped he'd be able to buy himself a clean shirt!

Two days later, a polite note from the bank informed me that I had overdrawn my account, to such and such an extent. Would I kindly call at my earliest convenience and settle? A letter came from one of the stores containing my own check returned from the bank with "No funds" stamped across it. And that miserable hired man came back roaring to Mr. Cross about a "dam worthless check," and threatened us with the Labor Commission.

All this was terribly humiliating to me, and Paul was just as amazed as I.

Mr. Cross soothed the hired man, and I took my dilemma to Francis Boalt.

He was in the tool shed greasing harness, but at Mary's call, he came in washed his hands, and was ready for his client.

His friendly greeting changed into a most *legal* manner when I told him that I had come on business. And when I had finished my tale of woe, he put on his Family Counselor air, and shook his head gravely. He seemed to know

all about it, however. In fact, I discovered that everyone knew it before I did.

Francis Boalt said, putting the tips of his fingers together, just like a real "Advisor": "My dear young lady. I'm not at all surprised; in fact, I — er — well, expected it."

"I don't see why. I never thought of such a thing," I answered tartly. "I think the bank has made a mistake."

He cleared his throat, hesitated, and intimated delicately that we had both spent too freely, not to say, recklessly.

I retorted: "What's the use of having a thirty thousand dollar ranch if one can't spend a few dollars without pinching them?"

He leaned forward in his chair, quite vehemently. "But, my dear Miss Annette, my dear Miss Torrel! A wise business man doesn't encroach on his principal, unless absolutely necessary; and that's what you've done. When one gets beyond his income, he attacks his capital. A conservative business can't figure more than ten per cent, and a farmer not that; owing to the unreliability of the elements and the perishable nature of his produce."

I just looked at him crossly. (Rhetoric didn't pay my bills.) What I wanted was some idea of how I could satisfy my creditors.

But he was coming to this. He went on with

a lot of advice, legal and otherwise, and included the suggestion that we sell our car. In this way we would rid ourselves of an unnecessary expense, and possibly be able to meet the outstanding debts.

"We can't get along without a car. All farmers have cars," I protested.

"Get a less expensive one, a Ford."

A Ford! I just laughed. I could guess what Paul would say.

"We can get money on the ranch," I said. "Paul says land is the very best security."

He shook his head, and counseled against such a move, for a quarter of an hour, but it didn't take. That seemed to me so much more sensible than giving up the car.

I got up finally, and told him goodbye. I presume he saw that I was unconvinced by his logic, for he followed me out to the gate, still talking.

I got in the car, still unconvinced and drove home. Paul agreed with me.

"I think you're right, Puss. I wouldn't pay too much attention to the old fellow. His days are about done. I don't suppose he keeps up with new business methods. Of course we'll make out all right. We can get money on the ranch, or sell some of those old cows. We should worry!"

So I decided, in direct opposition to the advice of my Family Counselor. I put a mortgage on my farm, a small one, of course, that could be paid off within the year.

CHAPTER VII

MR. CROSS AND ANNETTE DISAGREE

Well, as Paul said, "We should worry." Butter fat was high, and the cows were "pouring out the milk," to quote Mr. Cross. To be sure, we were sorry that we had made such a mistake, but then I told Paul of a consoling remark made by some wise man: "Show me a man who hasn't made a mistake, and I'll show you one who hasn't done anything more." We agreed that we'd made a good start toward success!

Bound to retrieve matters, we settled right down to farming, so I talked with some of the neighbors, who hitherto had acted rather skeptical. Now I found them kindly disposed, and full of good advice.

I thought we ought to do something more than milk cows, because we wanted to make all the money we could, as soon as possible, and catch up.

Mr. Arpsbagger, who had a chicken ranch, advised chickens. He told me how much he paid out and took in, and it seemed pretty good. I thought seriously of doing it until I

talked with Mr. Cattman who said hogs were the quickest and easiest money makers. He offered to sell me a good start of pure bred Duroc-Jerseys.

Mr. Arpsbagger didn't agree with his idea. He said:

"Because Cattman's a Farm Bureau man, he thinks he knows it all. I'll tell you, Miss Torrel, you jest farm as I do, and don't join no Farm Bureaus, and you'll get along."

Mr. Forest advised prunes, somebody else said sheep, and another, berries. I became confused, but the reference to the Farm Bureau stuck in my mind. I'd heard Francis Boalt and Mr. Carmichael talking about it. They both approved, and from what they said, it seemed a good thing with its Farm Advisor ready to give you all kinds of information. Think of getting expert legal advice a whole year for two and one half dollars!

At Mr. Cattman's invitation we attended the meeting one night. Most of the farmer folk were there, nice middleaged people, most of them. The Farm Advisor, a tall, lean man with a determined chin, talked about hogs a great deal, and I expect that was really what decided me to get hogs, as he said they went fine with cows, because they could eat the milk that was left over.

Mr. Cross was awfully against hogs. He said they would root up all the pastures and be all over the ranch, "because nobody couldn't keep a damn hog no place," and he said besides, the calves took most of the milk, and what was left, the cows drank.

I said: "Well, Mr. Cross, I call that downright silly. They had just as well drink water."

I went to see Mr. Cattman and looked over his hogs. They were certainly enormous things of a sort of burnt sienna color. They scared me to death, for they insisted on sticking their noses right on me. Mr. Cattman said it was because they were so gentle.

We talked business, and he told me a lot that I didn't know. He said a sow would farrow twice a year, with ten or twelve pigs each time. He really had known of their having twenty-five at once. Think of it, a possible fifty pigs in one year!

It looked propitious, so I decided on ten sows at thirty dollars apiece, to begin with, and one big hog, to insure continuity of species, at fifty dollars.

I made a quick mental calculation: Five hundred pigs yearly (of course there was no way of knowing, but it was only fair to split fifty-fifty on them; two hundred and fifty sows and two hundred and fifty boars — they

had to be one or the other). I counted up: thirty times two hundred and fifty equals seventy-five hundred dollars for sows, and *fifty* times two hundred and fifty! It fairly took my breath away. *All in one year!* I felt sorry for poor old Uncle Nat who had farmed sixty odd years with such meager results. If he had only known about Duroc-Jersey hogs!

We got the creatures home, and I selected the largest pasture for them. Mr. Cross grumbled and said if I had bought four sows it would have been too many, and the place would be *lousy* with pigs in no time.

"You'll find out," he said darkly.

I didn't risk my dignity arguing with him. I just smiled and thought to myself — "You'll find out, Mr. Cross."

While we waited for the pigs, we got a few sheep, goats, turkeys, guineas, and Chinese pheasants, and some cunning little red and yellow bantams. They looked so cute darting in and out among the speckled hens that were already on the ranch. I must say that Mr. Cross acted ridiculous at every new thing we got. He said nobody would be able to live on the ranch if we got any more trash. But I didn't let it worry me any.

Paul learned to milk, and I conquered my fear of the creatures, so that I was able to pet

Dolly, the Imported Ayrshire that had been taught to push one's hat off with her nose. She really was a darling old cow of the most impeccable lineage. Uncle Nat had imported her from Canada, and her calves always sold for big money, Mr. Cross said.

Mr. Cross taught Paul to plow, and I learned how to set chicken hens, when spring came. It was a lovely season although it stopped raining by the last of March. The farmers all complained on account of the crops, but I was glad. I detest rain; it makes everything so nasty and wet; besides that, we certainly had had enough rain to last for years to come.

April was lovely with all the green things coming out. We did enjoy it. Paul and I lived out of doors. I painted and sketched; and he rode about, getting tanned and healthy looking. Evidently out-of-door's life was what he needed.

Our joy was short lived, however, for it began raining again in May as soon as the hay was all down. The men began hauling in the afternoon, and that night it just *poured*. Everything was too wet to think of the next day. It remained cloudy all morning and we had a terrific thunder storm in the evening.

Two of the men, Bill and Charlie Graham

went home; but the other four stayed and we had to feed them. I suppose they weren't to blame; they hadn't any place to go. But it was a nuisance, just the same.

After three days of clouds and rain, the sun came out bright and hot, and dried the top of the hay. Mr. Cross had the men turn it all over, and as soon as it was about dry, the rain came again and drenched it.

This happened four times during fourteen days. Poor old Mr. Cross wandered disconsolately about studying the sky and the barometer, and developed such a grouch it was unsafe to speak to him. I was awfully irritated, too, for it was so wet I couldn't get out, but I told him not to worry; it would surely clear off some time. I didn't want him to think anyone blamed him, poor old man!

And Martha got so cranky, for the first time since she'd been with us, for she had to cook three big meals every day for those idle men.

"I don't mind, Miss Annette, when they're working," she complained; "but just to have 'em lay around and *eat!* Where do you suppose they put it all, anyhow?"

"I've wonderedt oo, Martha," I sympathized, for like her, I wasn't accustomed to the voracious appetites of working men. "I think they must be lineal descendents from Loki, who

not only ate the food, but consumed the trough as well."

This classical allusion to the old Norse god tickled Martha. Thereafter she alluded to the hired men as "old Looky's sons," adding, "And how they do take after their pa!"

It finally cleared up, after the hay was all spoiled. The farmers grumbled and grouched; they just *couldn't* get over it. It meant hundreds of dollars gone; and it did seem that it might as well have rained in April. The weather is certainly an awful trial to farmers! If there was only some way of controlling it; or dispensing with it altogether, they'd be a long way ahead.

All this time I hadn't forgotten my pigs, and I could hardly wait for the first sow to farrow. She was about as big as Dolly. Wouldn't she look cute with twenty-five pigs?

After one terribly wet and stormy night Mr. Cross came in to tell me that the pigs had come.

Paul and I rushed out to the pen, and there the old sow lay like a big red granite boulder, with the little red mites wriggling about her.

I counted them. *Seven!* Was that *all?*

My disappointment swept away my sense. I wailed:

"Oh, *shake her!* Maybe she's got some more!"

Paul gave me an amazed look, and began to laugh in the rudest manner possible, doubling up after the style of a hired man.

Mr. Cross pursed out his lips and said, "Well — I'll tell you: If them two little ones ain't took care of right away, *they're* goin' to die."

He climbed over the fence and picked them up and handed them to me.

Choking back my tears, I huddled the frail little creatures in my arms. In the house, after Martha's instruction for new born things, I wrapped them in hot flannel and poured warm milk down them. I kept this up all morning at intervals, but they didn't react very strongly.

While I was nursing my pigs that afternoon, Celia Hilyard came. She rode a high-stepping chestnut thoroughbred, and looked as if she had just ridden out of an old hunting print.

She was interested as could be in the pigs and somehow, she made me feel, for the first time, the pathos of the helpless little things. She touched them so tenderly with her soft white hands, and her sweet face was so full of gentle solicitude.

After we got through feeding the pigs, we had a jolly good time talking about things, music and art and books and theaters (nothing about farming). She sang a cunning little

thing or two from one of the latest musical shows, in *such* a feeling voice. Paul and I hadn't had such a treat for months. Paul had wandered in, not knowing who was there, and of course, he didn't wander out again until Celia got ready to go. Then he got his horse and rode home with her.

I watched them down the road. They looked awfully well together, riding side by side, right into the bright sunset. A dim, fanciful plan came into my mind, just as if I had been Paul's mother. Why not? With a happy feeling around my heart I went in to look at my pigs.

They were both dead.

CHAPTER VIII

THINGS LOOK BRIGHT FOR THE INDIGENT O.F.'S

After that Celia came often. The Hilyards invited us there. The father and mother were very gracious and friendly. We grew to be good friends. Once I had them all to dinner when we were free of hired men.

Paul and Celia went around together a lot, for there were balls and dances in the towns, and very good shows at Redlands, sometimes. Often we made up a party including Mr. Carmichael or Francis Boalt, or both, or we'd all meet at one of the three houses. So we had some social life. We all enjoyed our times at the Hilyards most, I think, for Celia was such a darling, and the Hilyards knew how to do nice things for young people.

The summer was fearfully hot, yet we got through it alive, until August when Celia had to go back to Berkeley for her Senior year.

We missed her terribly, and I was glad to see even Lucy Graham with her simple pansy face, come tripping in one day. I must confess I was glad when she left too, for when one got

past that flower face, — there was nothing. I suppose the girl was lonely over there in that bare canyon where she lived with no one except her father and brothers.

Out of pure charity, I insisted on her coming again, which she did quite often, and one October evening, when a quick, pouring rain came up, Paul took her home in the car.

Through the fall months there was the same harvest; getting in the late hay crop, potatoes, corn, apples, pumpkins, filling the silo, and hauling wood for winter. I told Paul we were a little like ants.

It seemed so queer to do all that in the summer time in preparation for winter. For the same reason Martha had worked all summer at putting up jars and jars of fruit, jellies, preserves, pickles, chow-chow and vegetables. I'd helped her do this, and I knew what hard, hot work it was. But it had to be done.

The rains "set in" early, as the country people said. November was the wildest, stormiest month. There were a great many Flu cases, but we escaped until after Thanksgiving, when Mr. Cross developed a mild case.

Martha dosed him, and I wanted to send for a doctor; but he said he wasn't going to have any of those "quack doctors" fussing over him; he'd "wear it out."

Saturday night he felt rather badly and took a bottle of Martha's home-made cough medicine to bed with him.

Sunday morning Martha came into my room before I was up. The whiteness of her chubby face startled me, but less than her news. Mr. Cross had died in the night, presumably of heart failure caused by the Flu.

I sat up, not being able to grasp it. "Martha, it isn't possible!"

"Yes, it is, Miss Annette," assured Martha with solemn sincerity. "I saw the milk buckets still in the dairy house so I went out to see how he was. They's no doubt of it, child. I went in and touched him."

I got right up and telephoned to the Coroner, and then we tried to eat the breakfast Martha prepared, but we were too upset. Paul had been to a dance the night before and didn't get in until morning, so he wasn't up. I let him sleep; there wasn't anything he could do.

While Martha was clearing the table, all of a sudden, I remembered the cows. Hitherto I had looked at the milking just as we regard the engineer's job on the train; it's done, and that's all there is to it. But now I realized what a terrible thing it would be if the engineer dropped dead at his post.

Martha thought about the cows at the same

time. We turned to each other with almost the same words. "Who's going to milk the cows?"

Martha thought of Paul first. "Can't Mr. Paul do it?" she asked.

I went into Paul's room and waked him.

He grunted fretfully, turned over and rooted his nose into the pillow."

"But Paul, you must wake up, and get up."

At my insistence he swore, half awake, but I shook him and made him understand.

He sat up then, and opened his eyes. He was about all in, I could see. He looked so terribly white and tired I was alarmed for fear he might be coming down with the dread disease. But there were the cows!

"Paul, those cows have to be milked."

"Aw, let 'em go 'til night." He flung himself back on the pillow, and dropped asleep.

I knew he ought to sleep. I went back to Martha. "I can't get him up," I said. "He's just simply all in. I don't know what to do."

Martha walked around the kitchen setting things to rights. She washed her dish rag and emptied the water, her pudgy face full of thought, and finally she said:

"I can milk, Miss Annette."

"Oh, *can* you, Martha? It really isn't much of a job; but it has to be done. I'll help you."

I had watched Mr. Cross milk Dolly once, and I knew you didn't hang a tin cup on the cow's horn and pump her tail, as Dustan had tried to make me believe.

"I haven't milked for a long time," said Martha rather doubtfully. "But when I lived on the ranch with my first husband, I had to milk."

"I think one doesn't forget how," I said hopefully.

We got our coats and rubbers, and Martha collected the cans and buckets. The rain was beginning to fall from the bleak December sky as we started. It was terribly muddy and rivulets of rain ran across the path.

We sloshed through them until we reached the cow barn. I opened the door. Everything looked so strange with the cows all in their stanchions, moving restlessly about, for it was long past their regular milking hour.

I can't endure smells, and it was awfully smelly. Delicacy forbids any description of things. The early morning aspect of a twenty chamber cow hotel is not a pretty sight. I had never been in the barn before except when it was clean and empty, so I hung back, I confess.

But Martha advanced with her usual business like way, picked up a small stool by the wall, and boldly entered the first stall. At the same

time she said, "So, Boss," in a soothing tone, and "Hist!"

I forced my shaking knees forward, and followed Martha's example.

I don't know what the cow thought. She gave me one wild look, and leaped up into the manger, kicking and bawling like an insane thing. Martha's cow gave an awful jump and fell down, on the floor, scrambled around and bawled, and all the rest began plunging and bellowing as if a flock of bears were after them. Pandemonium is a weak word!

I ran like a scared rabbit, clear to the door, and Martha got out of the stall precipitately; the cow was taking all the room.

"Goodness, Martha!" I chattered; "What in the world is the matter with them?" Martha looked rather white and scared too, although her voice was quite calm as she answered,

"They're afraid of us, I expect. They've never been milked by a woman. I don't believe we can do anything. You'll have to get Mr. Paul up."

They had quieted down, some, by this time, but they still rolled their wild eyes in our direction, and now and then one emitted a bawl that struck terror to the very depths of my being. I didn't think we could do anything either, and I didn't have any more courage to try.

Crestfallen, we sloshed back through the rain. At the barnyard gate we met Mr. Carmichael on horseback, all dolled up in a yellow rain hat and slicker, and rubber boots.

His hat was strapped under his chin, but he touched the brim.

"Good morning, Miss Torrel. I have just heard the sad news. Mr. Boalt thought of your cows, and I came over to see if I could help about milking them, you know."

I felt the blood rush to my face in sheer surprise and gratitude.

"It's awfully kind of you both. I should say you might help. Martha and I have been trying to milk, but we only succeeded in scaring them to death."

Mr. Carmichael's shocked expression was wholly on my account I know. He dismounted, tied his horse, and proceeded toward the barn. We went back to the house, and I made Paul get up and go out there.

Everything was very disturbing until after poor old Mr. Cross was laid away. The neighbors were all wonderfully kind. For sympathy and help in time of trouble, I certainly recommend the farming folk. They had all known Mr. Cross for a long time, and everybody wanted to do something. Since he had been on the ranch so long, we had the funeral from

our house just as if he were one of the family. It was, naturally, a great relief when it was over, though we couldn't help but feel sorry about the old man, he had been so good and faithful.

But though that part of it was over, the cow business wasn't settled. It humiliated me so much, because I had to depend on the neighbors twice a day to get those cows milked. Though Paul did what he could, it was really a big job, as we found out. I decided that I would make the acquaintance of my cows and be more independent in the future.

Mr. Arpsbagger telephoned next day that he had picked up a milker for me in town. Should he bring him out?

I said: "Yes, oh yes!" He came out later with an enormous red faced Swede who said he "bane a dairyman in the ole country."

He wanted twice as much as I had paid Mr. Cross, but I will say he "bane" a good man on the job. Mr. Cross wasn't a dairyman. He was just a faithful old man who had worked for Uncle Nat for years, and had never found out how much he was worth. The younger generation never make that mistake.

As time went on, I began to realize more and more, what an incalculable loss the old man was to me. While Ole's work was entirely

satisfactory, the cows were sleek, and the milk flow abundant, and the barns clean and airy; it ended there, where it began — with the cows. It was perfectly all right in his case, but with Mr. Cross things were different.

He knew every nook and corner of the ranch, every weak spot in the fences, the disposition of the farm machinery. He knew when to begin plowing and planting; when the pastures were thirsty, and the right turn of the bloom to mow the hay. He saw to everything. In reality he was my Manager, though neither of us ever thought of it. And now I grieved to think at what a meager wage!

But it was now up to me. To Ole's great disgust, I insisted on haunting the barn with a milk pail until the cows all grew convinced that a skirt was not a menace. I think Ole felt that the menace was to him, for he told Paul, "Barns no business for vomans. Vomans ought to stay in cook house." It didn't matter. With or without Ole's permission, I learned to milk.

I learned a number of other things also as I plodded along at my job, with Francis Boalt's helpful advice. Paul didn't help much; he couldn't get over the idea that "It was no trick to farm." I couldn't get him to buckle

down to the serious aspect of the business. He did only the things he wanted to do. He liked to do the running around, errands to town and such. Of course that was a help; but he was awfully careless about money.

However, we got along very well, and I felt quite comfortable, until Ole got up from the dinner table one day, and announced without preface: "Mek my monie. I bane go vay."

"Go away?" I ejaculated. "Where are you going?"

"I go vay. I kvit. Mek my monie."

He stood there, a big, awkward hulk, looking like an obstinate pig.

"Why, you can't quit. Who's going to milk those cows?" I demanded indignantly.

He shook his tow-colored head. "I no know. I kvit."

"What's the matter with you? Aren't you satisfied?"

"I bane like awright. I'm troo."

"But Ole," I protested with far more patience than I felt; "I can't think why you want to quit."

"I git yob to mans. I ain't like to vork to vomans," he blurted out.

"Oh, nonsense!" I couldn't keep the irritation out of my voice, but it didn't affect Ole any, for or against; he wanted to go, and

reiterated it persistently. So I wrote out his check.

As he took it, his ugly face turned brick red.

"So long, Lady," he said.

"Goodbye, Ole," I said cheerfully. "Good luck to you." Somehow, though I was particularly annoyed at his going, I felt a little sorry for him. I couldn't have told why, yet he looked so like a big, awkward dog that nobody wanted around.

He didn't look at me. Getting his blankets, he trudged down the road leaning under the heavy roll.

I went back into the dining room. The other men had gone out, even Paul. Martha was in there stacking piles of plates. "He ought to be kicked," she said viciously.

I began picking up knives and forks in silence. I felt a little that way too, for there were those twenty milk factories staring me in the face; every cog turning, every ounce of steam working for the usual daily output. I wished there was some way of shutting off the power in an emergency, but there wasn't; they had to be milked.

Paul and I spent the afternoon in town scouring the place for a milker, but nobody wanted to milk. We came home and attacked the problem ourselves. It was eleven o'clock at

night when we finished the separating, and washed up. I was never so tired in my life. My hands were all swollen, and my knees ached so that they almost refused to carry me to bed. We had to do it again in the morning. When we finished, we ate our dinner and drove to Redlands, twenty miles distant. There we got a smiling-faced Swiss from the Employment Agency, who agreed to take over the job at an increase on Ole's wages. But I couldn't help it; we had to have a milker.

CHAPTER IX

ANNETTE DIGS INTO UNFAMILIAR STRATA

Jan, the Swiss was just as competent as Ole, much better to look at, with his smiling blue eyes and tight curled hair, and his friendly manner was much more pleasant to deal with than was Ole and his stolid surliness.

Ole's precipitate departure and the plight in which it plunged us, woke me up to a fact of which I had hitherto been unaware. The men who worked for me were individuals, with thoughts, emotions and characteristics to be considered.

I had learned a great many things in the past few months as the ranch activities succeeded each other according to the seasons, and I realized that, in a measure, I was growing into the life. My urban life faded into the background. The soil is so dominant; its demands so insistent! It is like an egotistic personality that will not be ignored. Unconsciously I yielded to its superior force. And in nothing did it change me more than in my attitude of mind toward these rough men with whom I was forced into daily contact.

Daily I mixed with "men with their collars off," yes, as it were, their *shirts!* for the farmer is beyond the pale of convention. He cannot pick or choose, — ask for references. His hay is burning up in the shock, his potatoes rotting in the earth, his cornfields overwhelmed with weeds; he must have men to handle a hoe or stand up under a pitchfork.

Men from the higher walks of life, unless thrown out from the conventional paths, will not work on a farm. It is men whom necessity, not choice, sends out into the teeming fields to battle with the soil.

So it was that young, brawny men, strong with the lust of life, fresh from the hobo camp, the gambling hall, the saloon; old, weary men, pushed out from these places, their money gone, sat at my table and we met on the same level — the level of toil.

And the more because of this uncultured element into which I was thrown, did I hold on to the things that had been a part of my old life. I intended to go back to it. I didn't want to forget all the niceties of culture. Most of the country women used red tablecloths or oilcloths on their tables, and napkins were unknown except for company.

But I kept my white linen cloths, and had always a flower on my table. I tried the men

with napkins, but they almost invariably laid them respectfully to one side, for fear of getting them soiled. If they laughed at my efforts at "keeping up" I never knew it.

I always dressed with an eye to scrupulous neatness and taste, never appearing before these men except in meticulous order. It wasn't always easy, for being close to the soil means its grimy stamp upon you.

The country people criticized my invariable dressed up appearance. The farm women wore dark, serviceable prints and gingham to save washing, no matter how high the mercury, and often old and shapeless shoes. Hence my sprigged lawns and white shoes made a question of my intelligence and my efficiency. However, I didn't let it bother me, nor change my custom; it being simply a matter of personal taste, it harmed none, and should not have disturbed anyone. Though my code of "Vision" had had a number of terrible jolts, it was still alive. Such things as pertained to the consideration of others, I endeavored to fall in along with the "Romans;" thus I sat at table with the men. It being the custom that the farmer must eat with his men, it was not for me to antagonize my help by ignoring the ancient rite.

So I sat with my men, poured their tea,

listened to their talk, parried their compliments, and helped them, I am sure, to remember their mothers' "raisin'." Also I did not shrink from washing the tablecloths, black streaked from their grimy elbows.

We had all kinds of men; American, English, French, German and men of dark blood; men whose talk was often trite, yet as often, thrilling — tales of other lands and other lives; of mines and logging camps; of factories and fisheries; of northern gold fields and southern plantations; of eastern villages to the great stock ranches of the middle west.

I was carried from the Yukon to New Orleans; from the Cascades to the Blue Mountains; around Cape Horn; across the Isthmus and through the Canal; down the Mississippi and across the Gulf to Cuba and Jamaica; overseas to France, Belgium, Britain and Germany; to Japan, Australia and India, by the glib tongues of these men whose homes were where they hung their hats.

I attended Bull fights in Mexico; trekked across the great American Desert; battled with wounded bear in the Rockies, and experienced a shipwreck off the Florida Keys.

"Sure," said Irish Pat, adding color to his tale by his rich brogue; "the waves was washin' over the sides, the old tub wallowin'

like a sow in a puddle. An' some av the men was cursin', and some was cryin', an' some was prayin'. An' wan poor divil was a-thryin' to throw hisselt over the side. . . . "

" Didn't anyone try to stop him? " I asked.

" Ah, no," said Pat tolerantly. " Iverybody let iverybody ilse do pretty much as he plazed." Pat passed up his cup with a smile. " Another drop, if you will kindly, Lady."

I listened to these tales with the avidity of a child swallowing fairy tales. My life had been bounded by four apartment walls where windows opened on paved streets; but these men, swinging along the open Highway, had drunk deep of Adventure's beaded cup.

But the talk was not all of thrilling adventure. Often it was of fights and brawls in saloon and camp, wherever rough men congregate; of sharp card games and ways of showing the " Boss " that he could not override the workman's independence. And always this talk showed opposition to anyone in control, contempt for convention and disdain for the rights of the man who paid for having his work done.

This wearied me, savoring, as it did, of outlawry and treason, which is Adventure's licentious side. I aimed by my presence only to temper such talk, not subdue it.

Yet sometimes these struggles between primi-

tive men, interested me. There was one which seemed to me worthy of an epic. I don't know what the story teller saw in it; just brute ferocity perhaps, but I saw more. The intensity of passion which makes men fight unto death, raises the struggle to a dignity above a barroom brawl.

This was of two Indians (civilized, not savages) filled with the "Firewater" of civilization, who rode down the street like fighting Centaurs clasped in a close embrace, covered with blood from ever increasing wounds, each with a long, savage knife trying to let death in on the other's life; until one fell from his saddle, stabbed to death. The other holding his victory but a few hours, succumbed to his wounds. So both were victors; both were vanquished. Each took the other's life and gave his own in payment.

This was what I found hard to understand: the ferocity of these primitive passions.

I tried to picture this scene, and drew many inadequate sketches, only I drew savages. I couldn't visualize men of civilized life, fighting and killing each other like wild beasts.

Along with these tales, in other ways my education progressed. My fastidious nose became inured to the smell of stale tobacco mixed with the foul odor of sweat-stained clothing.

(The man of the fields does not *perspire*, he *sweats* as his horses do. He brings the proof of it to the table three times a day.) There is sweat in summer and in winter, boots soaked with the dung-mixed mud from barns and corrals.

But these are only small details of the ranchman's life. The real farmer doesn't notice them. The hard farmer composition cannot be impressed by trifles such as these; if it were he could not be a tiller of the soil.

I became familiar with strange and violent oaths until they no longer shocked me. Men did not often swear in my presence; but they shrieked vile epithets at the horses, dogs, machinery and used them in conversation among themselves. I heard much of it, but my sensibilities became calloused. This, too, was a part of my heritage, for oaths grow in the soil as they float on the sea.

As these various experiences revealed themselves to me, I came to understand that to the farmer falls the task of building and maintaining the foundation of the economic world; and always at the foundation, there is grime and toil. For that tremendous sky scraper some one must dig to bed rock, and set the foundation strong enough to bear the weight and balance of the structure.

This falls to the farmer because he has leagued himself with the soil, and it holds him close to the ground with his shovel and hoe.

Again, there was the social side of these men who drifted across my life. My experiences with some were amusing, some, tragic, some, merely annoying, and some, I would not relate because the men themselves were fine and true, though something had set them on the path of the wanderer, and others in whom the beast was uppermost.

Many times I received letters or postcards from men who had worked for me a short time and then drifted on. Often I was hard put to place the writer. Was it the sailor we called Jack, or that Englishman who left on a drunken spree and didn't even return for his pay check? Or the Irishman who told Paul that I was the only woman for whom he'd ever "cared a damn." He wished he'd lived a decent life. He was going to from now on, but what chance for a poor hobo like him?

We never knew whether or not he kept his resolution, probably not; yet I liked to think that the few weeks of quiet, orderly life for these adventurers, self-exiled from convention, would tally for them somehow in the great accounting at the last.

From these experiences I learned to treat all

men with the kind indulgence which one shows towards a friendly dog, or the very aged whose infirmity commands respect. This manner, flawless in itself, was the result of careful study on my part; and I found it almost always insured loyalty, tempered the humiliation of being bossed by a woman, and had a tendency to squelch any sort of emotion.

Paul did not get much from them. They did not like him, possibly because he did not try to command their respect. He argued and quarreled with them with the unreasoning heat of immaturity. Their talk bored him; their strength and working skill annoyed him. Superior as he felt himself to be, these men from far places dwarfed him, and he had nothing to offer in return. All his life had been spent in San Francisco, and they knew the young Bay City better than he, besides the older cities New York, New Orleans, London, Paris, Berlin and Tokio. And he was just a lad with no experience of life to match theirs.

For me, forced to recognize the individuality of these men, the next step was a natural sequence — there were among them possible companions, perhaps friends.

I wanted companions, friends. The life was not only hard with its endless duties, but inconceivably lonely, especially after Martha

went. Money matters pressed hard, and her monthly wage became a decided tax. On the farm the first place to begin economizing is in the house. The soil requires men and machinery, but the farm house is a poor creature of various makeshifts subject to the demands of the Master.

Celia was away traveling with her family. Lucy Graham had ceased coming, for which I was not sorry. Her silliness annoyed me. Yet I should have been more relieved if I had not known that Paul went there. She could not attract Paul seriously I knew, but he was gone a great deal, and I was alone much of the time. So when Dick Patten came he seemed a real gift of the gods.

Paul brought him home one forenoon to help with the hay, and before dinner was over, I realized he was no ordinary hired man. He had certainly dropped from some higher plane into my service. That it pleased him I could see the minute he stepped into the dining room, with an air of gentlemanly assurance that Dustan himself could not have surpassed.

He took in everything at once: the cool, tasteful room, the white linen and flowers, and me in a fresh blue lawn, entering that moment with a huge platter of smoking steak.

I surprised him most, I think, for all during

the meal, he kept turning his prominent blue eyes in my direction. He was handsome and very blonde, but there were lines on his face that might mean ill health, mental worries or dissipation. I couldn't tell. I liked his looks, yet when I noticed his white, well kept hands, I was doubtful about his ability in the field.

But here I was mistaken. Paul's report, and the talk of the other men, and his own blistered hands at nightfall proved him as old Gene said, "a workin' fool."

He lingered in the dining room after supper and asked me for a piece of cloth for a bandage.

"I'm afraid," he said: "I went at it a little strong at first. I've been out of work for some time." He watched my face as he spoke, and spread out his blistered hands.

I shivered. They were almost raw.

"You had better lay off tomorrow," I said. "You can't work with such hands as those."

"You think I couldn't earn my money?" He laughed and I felt my color rise under his glance.

"I'm afraid not."

I got some old linen and bound up his hands, as I often did for the men in cases of cuts or bruises and advised him to get some gloves.

He thanked me, laughed at the idea of gloves, and went out.

He laid off the one day, but the next day he was on the job vigorously.

Paul took quite a fancy to him, and invited him into the house of evenings. He and Paul hit off splendidly for he was musical, and played the piano brilliantly in accompaniment to Paul's violin. I discovered that he knew a lot about art, and could draw and sketch cleverly. One day he let fall in a familiar way the name of one of San Francisco's most noted artists. I saw by his face that he regretted that.

Afterward he was very discreet in his talk, and though Paul and I wondered a lot about him, we didn't find out anything more definite about who he was, or why he was tramping over the country like a common working man.

But he was a real godsend to us, and to me especially, it was wonderful to have someone who would talk of the things I was interested in, besides farming. I admit I took some pains to show him I hadn't always been a red handed farmerette.

He had worked about two weeks, and one evening he came to the well to fill the water jug, for the men in the field. I was standing there peeling apples at a table, because it was so much cooler outside than in the house.

We talked while he filled his jug and I peeled and cored my apples with a long, slender knife

that would dig out the cores without splitting the apple.

His jug filled, he asked me for an apple, and came past me to get it out of the pan. As he did so, he put his arm around me and stooped to kiss me.

Perfectly amazed, with a startled exclamation, I threw up my hand to ward him off.

I knew that I struck him, but I wasn't prepared for his yell of pain, and the way he swore as he released me and leaped back.

I swung around toward him. His face was all twisted with agony, and his hand was pressed tightly over his right eye.

"You've put my eye out!" he said furiously.

Then I remembered the pointed knife which I still held. I stood staring at him, sick all over with a deathly sickness that tied my tongue. To be sure, he had no business to touch me, but what was that compared with the loss of a man's eye? At last I managed to say:

"Let me see. Take your hand down!"

He did so, with a groan.

My heart pounded against my ribs. I took a deep breath to calm it. Instead of a gashed eyeball, I saw where the knife point had penetrated the lower lid just beneath the edge. A drop of blood oozed out of the cut.

I could have thrown my arms about his neck in pure relief, though cold chills still ran up my spine. Yet, since the eye was uninjured, it wasn't necessary that he should know how I felt.

"It's not out," I remarked placidly, though my heart still hammered. I resumed my apple job.

He wouldn't believe me until he went to the looking glass which hung on the wall, and assured himself.

He came back as mad as if the eye *was* out, his handsome face distorted with sullen anger.

"You certainly have a *nice* disposition!" he sneered. "How would you have felt if you had put out my eye?"

I glanced up, and assured him I didn't see why *I* should have any particular feeling in the matter; if he considered his eye of any especial value, he should be careful not to take it into dangerous places.

His exasperated look was very funny, but I didn't laugh.

He said that I was a cat, and I retorted in that case, I might be expected to use my claws.

Again his concentrated glare was deadly, but he sulkily picked up his jug and marched away without saying any more.

My callous behavior shocked him much, I

could see, and I supposed I had effectually erased all the good impression that I had previously made.

He sulked for the remaining two days of his stay, for I let him go on Saturday night.

He tried to be jaunty as he took his check, but I was distant and business like. His smile faded into a sneer. "I hope," he said caustically; "that some day your charity will equal your beauty."

"Thank you," I responded. "I hope for you that your judgment may grow to reach your ability to pitch hay."

With this graceful exchange of compliments, we parted. And I must say that in spite of the eye incident, I missed him.

CHAPTER X

SO SHE GOT A NEW FORD, AND HIRED A NEW
MAN—

The next hay crop dogged my heels. A new crew of men gobbled their noon meal with an avidity that is supposed to compliment the cook. I had ironed all morning over the hot stove and prepared dinner, so I was dreadfully tired. I sat, charitably wishing the pie, which they appreciated so, would choke them.

It didn't. They all survived it, and the last man tramped out leaving Paul and me alone to finish our meal. It was a fearfully hot day, and the dining room reeked with odors. Paul began about the car, which was out of commission. I might say "as usual."

"I'm tired of paying garage bills on it, Paul," I said. "We'll have to get rid of it."

Paul brightened at once. "I've been thinking that for a long time, Sis. It's cheaper to get a new one. Let's get a Chandler. They're a swell looking car."

"They all look alike to me, just now," I said wearily.

"Oh, Kid! There's loads of difference. Why the Chandler —"

"I mean," I said; "they all cost more money than we can afford."

"Sure." Paul reached for the cigarettes that he had learned to smoke since we came to the ranch. "But we can't get along without a car."

"We'll have to," I answered decisively. I hadn't intended to break the news so baldly, but I didn't feel diplomatic just then. "I'm going to turn it in and get a Ford Delivery."

"What!" Paul paused in the act of lighting. "One of those darned things with a box on the back? Nix, Nettie Ann. I won't stand for that."

I said nothing. No use to argue.

Paul got up excitedly and shoved his chair under the table. "We'd look like fools running around in a thing like that!"

"The man is coming out with it this afternoon," I said. And then he *did* storm.

I endured it for a few minutes, because I felt sorry for him about it, then I said:

"Now Paul, stop! We'll just have to face the fact that we're losing ground every day, and if we don't find some way to retrieve ourselves the ranch is gone forever. And I for one, am not going to lose all we've done here. I'm going to move heaven and earth," I declared, getting excited also, for I was so tired, and the

heat was stifling. "I'm going to end this five years the owner of this ranch. I'll let nothing stop me. It's going to be my one idea from now on, and I'm going to use any legitimate means to that end. And you've got to help me. That old car is nothing but a bill of expense. It eats up dollars worse than hired help. We *can't* afford another —"

Paul cut me off by slamming the door, flinging back something about "a hell of a ranch that couldn't support *some* kind of a car!"

Well, maybe it was. It had seemed just that and nothing else for the last three days with the mercury at a hundred and ten in the shade.

I felt a rush of hysterical tears. It was terrible to quarrel with Paul! I wanted to quit right there, and let the I. O. O. F.'s have it, but the trouble was, I couldn't. Suddenly I remembered my little chickens. There was always something to be fed!

I put on my hat, got my feed can, and went out into the blistering heat.

Everything outside drooped and wilted. The dahlia blossoms, shriveled in the bud, told of successive days of heat. The roses, pale and odorless, flared helplessly with blasted hearts, under the pitiless rays.

The hens stood panting, with spread wings,

under any bit of shade, and the hogs (the only suggestion of comfort visible) wallowed luxuriously in the cool mud.

I fed my chicks and went back to the house, finding it hard to remember that in February the ground had been white with snow. I washed my dishes, and dripping with perspiration, I, like the pigs, sought, not exactly a puddle, but a cool bath and dry clothing. I felt more comfortable, but my mind was still cross and revolutionary.

I had just finished dressing when I heard the jerky commotion an approaching Ford makes, and I knew that my "car" had come.

Hating the thing, I went out to greet Mr. Perry, the smiling salesman.

He leaped out of the absurd little contraption and began to enthuse over my purchase with the air of a pup that has just found an old bone to gnaw.

I cut him short by telling him that the old car wouldn't budge an inch, and he'd probably have to tow it into town.

It takes more than that to phase an automobile salesman. He continued to smile and said that was "quite all right, Lady." And wouldn't I "like to get in and try her gears, and see how simple and easy," etc.?

Well, of course, however I loathed the shining

little upstart, I supposed I'd have to learn to run it. I got in.

Before we could get started, I saw Jake, the tall, lanky individual whom I had hired to cut the hay come across the creek with the mower.

What next? One of the men had quit the day before, not liking Paul's suggestion that he pick up his hay shocks cleaner, and one had laid off with a chill.

I waited until Jake got near enough to announce that the mower had "done quit dead on him."

"What's the matter?" I asked.

He lifted his wilted black hat to scratch his head. "I don't know, Miss."

"Why don't you know?" I asked exasperatedly. "I hired you because you said you knew how to run a mower."

"Well, ain't I been runnin' it?" he asked tartly. "I've run 'er till she's stopped."

I saw that another word would hopelessly offend his dignity, and likely make me one more man short. With difficulty I mustered a smile.

"Anybody who can manage a mower as well as that, ought to know how to make one."

He rose to my compliment with a foolish grin. "It don't always work, Miss. I can manage a dozen biscuits like yours, but I couldn't make one to save my neck."

It was my turn to grin, which I did. I had learned it was a fatal move to criticize the hired man!

“ But can’t you do *something* ? ”

“ I could take ’er to pieces,” he suggested hopefully.

Here Mr. Perry stepped forward politely, saying that he had had considerable experience with farm machinery — perhaps he could locate the trouble.

He followed Jake out to the implement, and soon came back and said it hadn’t been oiled properly, and something or other had “ heated ” and “ froze ”; and that the sickle head had had “ too much play ” and had “ got to working.”

I inquired if there was any way in which I could inoculate my hired men with the malady of the sickle head?

Mr. Perry laughed and answered that it didn’t generally take; hired men were immune to the trouble.

There was no oil, so I set Jake to shocking hay, and Mr. Perry and I started for town in the new Ford Delivery.

I didn’t have any trouble learning how to run it, so Mr. Perry left me in town saying he’d be out the next day to see about the old car.

I got some oil and groceries and deciding, since I was in town, I might as well take out a

man, I drove up and down the streets in search of one.

There seemed to be a number not particularly busy, lounging around, but after inquiring variously about the hours, the wages, accommodations, the size of my crew and distance from town, they all were too exhausted to make any greater effort.

One had just come in "offen a job," and was "sort a used up" and thought he'd "lay off fer a spell." One hadn't "ever worked so far out of town," and it was "too hot to pitch hay." Another had a "kind of funny feelin'" in his head.

Seeing that they were all too delicate for my service, I turned about, pretty well disgusted.

At the corner a tall young man in khakies stopped me and asked if I was looking for a man.

I gave him the "once over." He was rather good looking, clean and tanned, with a pleasant face, at first glance, too young for the Foreign Service stripes on his sleeve.

It was my turn to ask questions. Could he work horses; run a mower, a Ford; gasoline engine, plow, feed cutter, separator? Did he know anything about the internals of these various implements? Could he milk? Had he ever worked on a farm?

With an amused smile lurking in his hazel eyes, he modestly acknowledged himself to be familiar with the details of all farm work.

“Are you steady and reliable?” I added this query as an after-thought.

He nodded with a gleam in his eyes that did not escape me. “As a clock,” he confessed. “Of course,” he added; “I have to be wound up now and then.”

I wasn’t desperately charmed with his cleverness, and I didn’t know just what he intended to convey by having to be wound up; but he was freshly shaven, and I wanted a man, so I opened the Ford door and commanded him to get in. Not a word had he questioned as to conditions relating to the job.

He darted a keen glance at my face from under his eyelids, and in a courteous voice begged leave to get his belongings, which, on his return, consisted of a battered suitcase and a bed tightly rolled in canvas.

During our talk on the way out, it developed that he had been twenty months in France; part of the time on active service in and out of the trenches and part in the hospital recovering from the wounds, the proof of which he bore on his sleeve.

He pointed to it with pride, and fumbling in his pocket, drew out a small box. Looking

into my face for approval, he showed me a *Croix de Guerre*.

It was the silliest thing possible; to show me this before we had gone six miles! Hired men were always trying to show off. So I said:

“ Oh! Did you win it? ”

He looked around quickly at me, and gasped as if he had been doused with cold water. It was funny! Recovering himself instantly, he answered in bad French:

“ *Mais, non Mademoiselle jolie. Je l'achetée après la guerre avait fini, pour la somme a dix sous.* ”

My cheeks flamed at the impudence of the “ pretty lady.” I gave him an indignant look just as we started down a hill, and not conscious of what I was doing, I jerked open the gas.

The silly little car made a terrific leap down the grade, and plunged for a ditch beside the road.

I forgot where the gas control was and everything, and reached for an emergency brake that wasn't there. It didn't take more than a second, but I felt us spilling all over into that ditch, which looked as deep as a canyon, and I heard everything splintering and smashing, when his hand shot out, grabbed the wheel, turned it and shut off the gas.

Del Lizzie leaped back into the road and steadied down.

“What made you do that?” inquired my new man sharply. His face — serious — showed the hard lines of a man.

I didn’t know why I’d done it, but I said, “It’s the way I drive.”

“It’s all right, I s’pose; if you don’t mind tipping over,” he remarked, and laughed frankly.

I felt awfully silly, so I asked with a slight sarcasm if he were at all nervous.

“As the dickens — for you, — if you’d happen to be alone,” he added. “First time you ever drove a Ford?”

I admitted it was. “We had a Nash — ”

“I see.” He reached down in the bottom of the car and picked up his Cross, brushed it tenderly, and deftly pinned it on my sleeve. It was a simple act done with the artlessness of a child. “You deserve a Cross like this if you’re running a ranch on your own, and driving a Ford, too,” he said.

I looked at the trifle that meant so much, and from it to his pleasant face. My irritation lessened. Unpinning the Cross, I handed it back to him. “Take it,” I said. “I’m not brave. I just didn’t know what I was getting into.”

"Like some of us war heroes," he agreed.

"Of course I know you didn't buy it," I felt constrained to say.

"Not for ten *sous*," he admitted, taking the Cross and returning it to its case. "It nearly cost me a leg? But it's worth it!"

"Why don't you wear it?"

"Oh," now he was a big, grown up boy. "It looks too much like showing off. I saw a soldier in Denver once, he had about a dozen different kinds. He must have been some man on the field. There was a girl on his arm, and he strutted down the street like he was shouting to the whole city to take a look at a *real hero*. It made me sick. I keep mine to show to anybody I like, and want 'em to know I've got it."

There was not a trace of embarrassment in his voice or face as he turned to me with a smile, that made it seem quite natural that he should like me and wish me to know what he had done. I rather thought I was going to like my new man. It appeared too, that different people had different ideas about the trait of "showing off."

As we emerged from the heat and dust on the west side of the river, and crossed the bridge, the sun cast long, pointed tree shadows over the placid water. I hurried because I had to get supper and there wasn't much time. But

I stopped a few minutes as we came by the Forest place, to return a pound of tea that I had one day borrowed in haste from Mrs. Forest.

The whole family came out to the car; the three sturdy, handsome boys, two pretty little girls, Mr. Forest and Mrs. Forest with her baby in her arms. She looked flushed and tired, and drooped under the weight of the husky baby. I asked if she were ill.

"No. I'm feeling all right now," she said. "I was nearly all in last week when we had so many men to cook for. And I couldn't work in my garden either then, and the weeds got such a start! I think I worked too long this morning trying to hoe them out."

"I tell her she works too hard," said Mr. Forest.

"Well, one just has to get them out, or they'll take the garden. I wouldn't have been so tired, but I promised my chickens I'd surely clean out their house today, so I've been working at that this afternoon. It's such a hot, dusty job."

"I told you I'd do that as soon as I got around to it," interposed Mr. Forest with a trace of irritation in his voice.

"But John," protested the wife; "you never get around to it. There is so much to do," she turned to me excusingly; "and the

hot weather coming on, the vermin gets so bad. You know, Miss Torrel, you can't get anyone to do those things. And John is so busy all the time."

A car passed us. In it were Francis Boalt and Mr. Carmichael.

Mrs. Forest spoke of what I already knew, that the aunt had died and Mr. Carmichael was looking for a ranch to buy.

"If he'll wait a couple of years, he can have mine," I said.

"I think you can deal with him, all right," said Mr. Forest. "Somebody was asking me the other day whether you were going to marry Carmichael or Francis Boalt."

I felt a shock, but I answered that I wouldn't decide until I found out if either wanted me.

"We hope someone will be able to persuade you," Mrs. Forest said in her pretty way. "We don't want to lose you."

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Forest," I said. But I didn't add that I hadn't the slightest intention of marrying anyone and settling down to the hard existent conditions of the farmer's wife.

After we drove on, my new man asked about Mr. Carmichael, for the sake of conversation, I suppose. When I explained, he said:

"Oh sure. Remittance man. There's herds of 'em in Montana, where I come from."

The men were all in when I got home. Paul had the kitchen fire going like a furnace, and was peeling potatoes. I took his job. It was about 130 degrees Fahr. in there, but that was nothing. There was only one thing to be considered, and that was the men's supper.

By the time the gong rang the new man had inspected the mower, made friends with the crew and came in to the supper summons, with the two Airedales at his heels.

Halleck Trent (that was the name he gave) fell into the routine of our life with surprising ease. Everyone liked him, even Paul, and he proved from the first, an excellent hand. He had a good broad grasp of practical things, for he had been orphaned early, he told me; and since had knocked about the world "on his own," served in the world war and "did a few more things." I couldn't quite "get" him. There seemed an undercurrent beneath his light, engaging manner, just as his face changed sometimes from a simple, attractive boy's, to the hard, set lines of a man.

But that didn't matter. He was more intelligent and capable than any man I'd ever had, and he actually knew something about farm work and machinery. For the second time, I had made a real "find." I hoped it wouldn't turn out like Dick Patton.

CHAPTER XI

ANNETTE RECEIVES A PROPOSAL — THE HAND OF THE MASTER

The heat increased, and the flies swarming in from the stables, nearly drove me crazy. As the summer advanced, work piled up all over the state. Men were harder to get, less competent and less choice. On my own ranch the early fruit, potatoes, garden, young corn, the weeds that sprang up as if from a Hindu's magic spell, the ever recurring irrigating problems, the dairy, horses, hogs and machinery all demanded attention; and the everlasting hay-making stood over us like a Giant with a whip.

And the awful heat! and the ever-gaping maw of something that must eat! Worn to a shadow, I worked the farm woman's seventeen hours per day, and hated the gleam of morning light that ushered in another day's toil.

The men came in disheveled and weary at night; the horses lagged in their collars and still the striving earth urged us on. There was no help nor stop. We were caught in the great factory of the Soil, and the Master whipped each of us into place.

I broke down under it, and had to send for

Martha, good, fat old Martha, as welcome as a broad armed oak at noon day.

On top of this, two letters came: one from Pinky who said she was off to Pacific Grove for a month. She was all tired out, what with taking care of Baby and the housekeeping. And it was so *hot* in the city. How she envied me in the country under those wonderful oaks, and that beautiful stream of water!

Pink "was all tired out" taking care of one baby, and ordering meals for Jimmy from the delicatessen, and with a woman to come once a week and clean!

I wanted to write and tell her about Mrs. Forest who washed, ironed, baked, churned, cleaned, scrubbed, sewed, and kept house and cooked for a family of eight, with six hired men added; and who also raised chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, pigs and a garden, and when she had nothing else to do, went out and helped her husband fix up fences. Only I didn't have pep enough to start in. And I didn't want to shock Pinky; she was almost as delicate as the average hired man!

The other was from Dustan who asked if he might come up for a fortnight; and Serena had heard so much about the ranch, she wanted to come also.

I laid down the letter with a terrible sinking

in my stomach. I couldn't have them. I simply *couldn't!* It was so hot, and all those smelly men, and that disgusting little Ford, and the flies! And *Serena* of all people! I just held my head in my hands and shrieked (inside of me). No! No!! No!!!

Dustan's clear-cut, aristocratic face rose to my mind in front of all the chaotic background of work, hurry and heat, and I knew that I wanted to see Dustan. I wanted to hear his quiet, even voice, and feel the sustained clasp of his smooth, cool fingers. But honesty and common humanity forced me to write, that though I'd love to have them, it was so terribly hot they would simply *die!*

Dustan wrote back saying cheerfully that it couldn't be hotter than in the city just then.

There wasn't anything more to say, so on the date they set, I got Francis Boalt to drive in after them. I simply couldn't face them in the Ford Delivery. Thank Heaven! It turned a little cooler that evening.

Martha did herself proud in the matter of "eats," and *Serena* was delighted with everything. She liked to eat, as her curves bore proof.

I just looked at cleanly Dustan and his ease, and reveled in his low cultured voice as the Prodigal must have gloated over the fatted calf.

Paul too, was jubilant, for the poor boy was about as starved as I.

Serena put on her best behavior and said everything was lovely, but wasn't I a little thinner?

"I should say so," said Dustan. "What have you been doing to yourself?"

I just smiled and said, "Oh, I always get thinner in the hot weather."

Serena continued her patronage. I had such a quaint little retreat, but didn't I feel — well — sort of *unsexed* among so many rough men? And wasn't I afraid?

Dustan looked around at her with uplifted brows; and I answered, hardly able to be civil.

"No. I feel like a queen on her throne, among her loyal subjects."

Of course I didn't; but that was the way to impress Serena. In truth I felt like any other farm woman working from daylight till long past dark, trying to make both ends meet, and so busy getting the hired men fed, there was no time for personal feelings. But it wasn't necessary to tell Serena that.

It was pleasant though, having them. I hadn't seen any of the old Bunch for so long. At least I enjoyed Dustan, who was a good sport. He even put on a pair of Paul's overalls and went out and pitched hay.

But Serena was an awful trial, to me, at least. She stayed up all night talking, playing, walking or driving with Paul, (she pretended to think the Ford great fun), and then she would never get up until eleven, and Martha or I would have to get her breakfast, just at the time when we were most busy getting the noon meal for the men.

The worst of it was, we had to put up with her vagaries and make it as pleasant as possible for her; because if Serena *didn't* enjoy herself, nobody in her vicinity did either.

Dustan poked around and painted, sketched, made friends with the country people and the hired men. Still on the lookout for "types," he offered one of the men five dollars to pose for him.

That independent gentleman glared at Dustan and told him to "go to hell with his rotten paint, or he'd knock his block off."

Immensely tickled, Dustan reproduced him from memory, slouch, glare and all.

It was a type surely, and I pinned it up on the dining room wall just to show Bill Stark how easily he had lost five dollars. The other men geyed him, and inquired if he were "going into the movies" or be a "bally dancer!"

Meanwhile Serena tired of Paul and acquired a "summer case" on Halleck Trent. She was

always dressing up in lovely, flimsy gowns and finding excuses to talk to him, or dropping her handkerchief for him to pick up; which, I must say, he did very gracefully for a hired man. She got him in the habit of coming on the porch after supper to talk, which wouldn't have been anything very dreadful, if the other men hadn't taken exception to it and sulked. Paul too, got cross and wouldn't stay around, but went off nearly every evening, to see Lucy Graham, I supposed.

It turned hot again. Serena gasped and wilted. The hay balers came unexpectedly, four extra men, and Martha collapsed with a chill.

There wasn't any help to be had, except what Paul and Dustan gave me. I hoped Serena would go home, but she didn't. She ambled about in bewitching negligees and had headaches. These I had to try to alleviate in addition to all my other work and taking care of Martha.

She always perked up in the evening and then we all had to entertain her. She played between Halleck and Paul, not very cleverly, I could see. They came to a sort of understanding over her, and Paul got over his pet.

Francis Boalt and Mr. Carmichael came over one evening. I told Serena about Mr. Car-

michael's inheritance so she turned her attentions to him. But after he had talked for fifteen minutes on the superiority of the Alsike and Timothy mixture over Red Clover, she deserted him for Francis Boalt.

I was so tired every night, I wanted to crawl off and die, and I didn't feel any peppier this night, only I had to be hospitable. So while the rest were talking I went into the kitchen to make some lemonade.

Mr. Carmichael offered to come with me. While we squeezed lemons he told me all about the ranch he had bought with acres of alfalfa, and cows already on the ground, and the house he intended to build, and that he expected to leave Francis and go to farming on his own place, soon.

My tired feet pained me like the toothache, but I smiled and said it was so nice, and agreed that the dairy business was the most interesting and lucrative occupation, with the greatest future possible. I added that we were sorry to lose him out of the community.

He answered that I was awfully kind, and then before I had any idea of what he was coming to, he suddenly made me an unimpassioned, though definite proposal.

I was so surprised, and annoyed too. I gasped out:

“ Oh, my goodness! No. No farmer need apply to me. Put the sugar in and stir it up, and get the glasses out of the cupboard. My feet are killing me! ”

Poor Mr. Carmichael reddened up into the roots of his pale hair, and his outstanding ears looked like twin tail-lights. He went meekly to the cupboard just as Dustan and Halleck came in to see if they could help.

They could. I loaded all of the three with the pitcher, glasses and cakes and sent them back while I blew out the light, slipped off my shoes, and sat down with a groan, feeling that never again would I be able to face Mr. Carmichael after my inexcusable rudeness.

Paul came in pretty soon and found me sitting on the wood box in the dark, nursing my aching toes.

“ What’s become of you, Sis? Why don’t you get out there? ” he complained. “ This pitcher’s gone dry. Is there any more ice? ”

“ No, there isn’t,” I said wearily. “ I forgot to re-wrap it last night and it nearly all melted. Get well water; it’s cool enough.” I’d got to the point that I didn’t care if it was warm as dishwater. But I put on my shoes and joined my guests, leaving Paul to make the lemonade.

The next day the balers got through so early

in the forenoon that they couldn't decently stay for dinner, and Martha missed her chill, so life assumed a more roseate hue.

At noon there came a telephone call from Celia. She was home again and intended coming over to see us.

I told Paul, who was just foolish, he was so pleased. He at once suggested a moonlight picnic on the creek, and I couldn't agree quick enough. We all flew around and made up a nice lunch, and by the time Celia came, we were all ready.

She rode over on her horse, but she had a little green organdie dress in a bundle tied on her saddle. She looked like a bunch of fresh ferns when she put it on. Dustan asked me if I thought she would sit for him. I hoped she would because she was lovelier than ever, and sweeter if possible.

We sat around and talked until evening, for she had been gone so long, nearly a year. I helped Martha get supper for the men. Then we all got our things together as the sun began to get low. As we were one man short, Serena suggested that I ask Halleck Trent.

I agreed if she'd take care of him, for I knew that Celia wanted Paul and I wasn't going to have him on my hands.

I asked him. He looked surprised yet pleased

and asked if we were going before supper. As I said we were, he went off to change his clothes.

As we were going just over in the field, we started about sundown with our picnic paraphernalia. Paul carried the lunch-hamper, Dustan an armful of rugs and Halleck a lot of cushions. Celia had the coffee pot, and I a pail for water. Serena took her lovely self and her parasol. The latter, not because the sun was so hot (as she said) but because her blonde hair looked so well against the lilac background.

Zed came trotting up all primed to go, but I made him stay back (to his infinite disgust) because Serena didn't like to have dogs along. Everyone in the party understood that, except Zed who lay resignedly down with his nose flat to the ground and gazed at me with reproachful eyes.

In the field the purple haze of sunset hung low, blurring the outline of hill and tree to resemble a wonderfully soft etching, colored with summer tints, and there was no sound at all except the faint gurgle of running water.

We found a beautiful place down by the creek where the receding water had left a sand and gravel bar. We could see the water's tranquil flow, and through the circle of trees surrounding us, we saw the red sun go down and the moon take its place in the warm gray sky.

The men built a fire of driftwood and set the coffee to boil, while Celia and I stretched the tablecloth on the smoothest part of the bar, and laid out the lunch. Serena, of course, just sat on a rug with all the cushions around her, looked charming, and chatted to Paul and Halleck Trent.

When lunch was ready we gathered about sitting cross-legged in reach of the table and ate, not minding the cramps that got in our knees.

I watched Serena keep Halleck busy waiting on her, which was right as it made him feel one of us. After we finished eating we still sat there in the pleasant firelight. Paul and Celia sang, Serena and Dustan told travel tales and Halleck contributed some interesting war experiences.

"Tell us how you won your Cross, Mr. Trent," begged Serena.

He laughed and said: "Oh, there isn't much to tell. The General dropped one while distributing Crosses one day, and I picked it up. Couldn't ever get up the courage to return it," he added as he rose to get more wood for the fire.

We all laughed, and while he was away Dustan told us that he had volunteered to deliver a message under heavy fire, and though he got it through, he was badly wounded.

The fire flared picturesquely under the fresh fuel Halleck brought, the sparks dancing skyward through the smoke like tiny atoms of flaming life. He resumed his place beside Serena and sat there looking so serious I couldn't help wondering where his thoughts wandered or dwelt.

For my part, I felt restless. The firelight flickered on Celia's ruddy hair as she talked to Paul, a gay little chatter like a brook running over bright pebbles. And Paul's attractive boy face showed that he had entirely forgotten the rest of us.

I looked down at Dustan who lay beside me stretched out on his back, gazing up at the twinkling star-candles above. His face in shadow, hid his thoughts from my predatory mind. Dustan's impressionable soul was very likely to lead his thoughts into formless dreams destined later to take on marvelous shapes with unbelievable color and beauty.

Serena's purring voice challenged Halleck and I felt alone. I turned my attention to the fire which crackled and swung in the vagrant breeze, eating its flaming way into the heart of the dead brush, and letting the dying embers fall into the mass of red coals, which in turn, would soon be cold white ashes. It seemed a living thing: fire, hot and red, and burning like life, growing

out of the small spurt of a lighted match. And like all the big things of life, as ready to flare uncontrolled to the destruction of a city, as to burn quietly within bounds to the frying of an egg for breakfast.

Serena again jolted my meditations with a cry of real terror.

“ Oh, Mr. Trent! Look! What’s *that*? ”

We all looked. Dustan, startled out of his dreams, sat up. All eyes followed Serena’s tremblingly pointing finger.

Out of the dark underbrush behind us, cast in shadow by a pile of drift, shone two round balls of fire watching us intently. They shifted slightly, disappeared and came back, eyeing us in a sinister way.

“ It’s some wild animal,” said Dustan in a low voice, not without apprehension.

“ A *bear*, do you think? ” breathed Celia, her face white even in the ruddy glow of the fire.

“ It isn’t big enough for that. And there’s no bear around here — is there, Torrel? ”

“ Never heard of any,” answered Paul.
“ But it might be a mountain lion.”

“ They spring on you out of the dark, don’t they? ” I asked. I confess I felt afraid with those two detached, gleaming balls suggesting all sorts of terrors.

Serena gave a faint shriek of horror and crept closer to Halleck Trent.

"It won't attack us while we're near the fire," consoled Dustan.

"But how in the dickens will we ever get away from here?" demanded Paul. "We can't sit here all night."

"We might take fire brands and wave them around our heads as we ran," suggested Celia hopefully. "I've heard of doing that."

Halleck Trent hadn't said anything. I turned to look at him.

He sat still, letting Serena lean, trembling, against him, but he didn't seem to be paying much attention to her. Instead he looked steadily in the direction of the creature that had stalked and found us. He gave a low, sharp whistle.

The fiery balls wavered.

"Don't scare it away from there," I entreated; "We won't know where it is then."

He whistled again, and, as I feared, the creature bounded out of the brush through the intervening shade, and catapulted itself on me.

I shrieked like a Commanchee.

Dustan sprang to my assistance and Celia cried distractedly:

"Paul! Oh, *Paul!*" And then Zed, the

scamp, jumped all over me, licked my face, and began barking wildly for a piece of chicken.

I pushed him away, and we all laughed and laughed over our silly fright.

Paul tossed Zed a bone and he lay down beside Halleck to gnaw blissfully.

Celia came and knelt on the sand to pull his ears with soft, loving fingers. "You bad, nice doggie!" she teased. "Did you know it was Zed, Mr. Trent?"

Halleck laughed his low, attractive laugh. He rose and helped Serena to her feet. "No," he said; "I didn't know, but I thought it might be, as I sent him back again after we started."

Feeling rather silly over my screech, I reached and boxed Zed crisply, not very hard, however. He took it as a delightful joke and went tearing about making the fields ring with the echo of his barking.

It was time then to go, so we gathered our things together, extinguished the camp fire and went back to the house.

Halleck disappeared with a courteous "Good night." Serena said that her head ached and went to bed. Paul saddled his horse and rode home with Celia.

Though it was late and I had to get up early in the morning, Dustan and I lingered on the

porch where the moonlight filtered through the vines. I told Dustan what I hoped for Paul and Celia.

"Of course I'll miss Paul terribly," I said.

Dustan put his arm around me and I leaned for a minute against his shoulder. Neither of us spoke. In the absolute silence of the summer night around us, we heard the rumble of a far off train and its shrill whistle. The dining room clock struck twelve clear, musical strokes. I drew away from him and went to my own room.

Serena planned to go home next day, and I must confess I didn't urge her to stay. I did voice polite regrets, of course, but she said she'd promised Geraldine Pahtune that she'd visit her at her father's country place on the Russian River.

I understood. I'd met the Pahtunes once. They were "real people" according to Serena. The father was something of an art critic and patron, awfully egotistical and opinionated. Geraldine was rather more disagreeable than Serena, being wealthy and in a position. I hoped that Serena might be able to annex Mr. Pahtune, who was a widower, for if I was going to marry Dustan, which I knew was very likely some day, I wanted to be good and rid of Serena.

She got away, but Paul and I persuaded Dustan to stay longer. After she was gone, life went along quite pleasantly.

Dustan set up his easel at one corner of the garden under a big walnut tree. I stayed out there much of the time, and hoed and irrigated the vegetables while he painted. Sometimes we'd change off; he'd hoe while I painted. But he was unfortunate in hoeing up the vegetables instead of the weeds, and I didn't see colors exactly as he did.

He was awfully interested in "getting under the skin" of country life as he said. He tramped around over the neighborhood with his sketching pad and talked to the farmers and the farm women. He brought home numbers of pretty sketches of children and places, of pure-bred cattle and horses, of quickly caught expressions and moods of the men and women with whom he talked. These he pored over as a chemist pores over his crucibles.

One hot day he came home and flung himself and his portfolio on the bench under the walnut tree.

"I saw something today that made *me* sit up and take notice."

I left my irrigating ditch to take care of itself and approached him inquiringly.

"I stopped in at the Forest place to get a

drink — I *was* warm! Your Stonehouse County sun is certainly fervid. After I got my drink, I stopped to talk with Mrs. Forest. And in came that boy — or man, who works there — Tom — ”

“ He draws a man’s wages,” I said.

“ — yelling at the top of his voice where was John? The plow team had become scared and the “ stallion was raisin’ hell ” — Pardon me, his words, Annette. Mrs. Forest jumped up with her baby in her arms, and ran outside. I followed though I didn’t know what was wrong. From the yard we could see the team pitching around. One horse was down and the other three raising general Cain. She said, ‘ Why didn’t you unhitch them, Tom? ’ He began to blubber, and she turned to me. ‘ Take the baby,’ and started for the field. I passed baby on to the oldest girl and took after her. And, by George! If she didn’t unhitch that stallion out of that plunging bunch, and put him in the barn, while we two stood by like gaping fools. I opened the barn door for her, that was all I knew how to do.” Dustan’s gray eyes glowed violet as they always did in excitement.

“ She’s a farm woman,” I said. “ They’re like that.”

“ But she might have been injured, or killed! ”

“She had to do it, just the same. Some of the horses would probably have been killed if she hadn’t. Farm women never consider themselves.” I went on to tell him of little Mrs. Keene who came with pick and shovel to raise the dam in the irrigating ditch so that her garden need not die for water. “And Dustan,” I added; “she was about to become a mother.”

Dustan got up and tramped about. “I can’t understand such conditions!”

“Simply this.” You know the closer the races are to aboriginal life, the more labor falls on the female — ”

Dustan glared at me and interrupted with, “But confound it, Annette! The American farmer isn’t an aboriginal.”

I shook my head. “No, not exactly. No one would call him that. But the life is close to primal life, and conditions are primitive. Where else would you find cultured, educated women cleaning out chicken houses and building fences? The Forests have money, and Mrs. Forest was a High School teacher before she married. There is work to do, and women must do their share.”

“Share! That sort of thing is not a woman’s business.”

I looked down at my work roughened hands.

“Those are just specific cases of meeting a condition as all farm women do.”

He turned on me. “But, damn it! I *beg* your pardon, Annette. What is that ass of a hired man for? Why don’t Forest keep a competent man?”

I laughed shortly. “*Now* you’re getting down to brass tacks, Dustan. ‘They ain’t no such animal.’ Or but rarely. A competent farm hand will soon be as rare as a gold quarter.”

“But why?” demanded Dustan. “Why not? What are the Agricultural Colleges doing?”

“Turning out Farm Managers, not competent farm hands. It’s not the fault of the colleges; it’s the men, nobody wants to be a competent farm hand.”

“Well, by George! All I can say, it’s a damned curious condition!” Dustan forgot to apologize.

“It’s very regrettable.” I remarked.

It was out of this, I think, that Dustan’s great picture grew; “The Woman of the Farm.”

It was beautiful! A wide shining beam of light from the west, reaching almost to the center of the picture; caught, blinded, the eye, and threw it back to the somber background of an ancient forest, dark with mystery and gloom.

Then, and not till then, you saw the real sub-

ject of the picture: the heroic figure of a woman in the dim half light. Her broad, erect shoulders formed for burdens; her strong forearms, tanned almost to Indian darkness, with her hands open for any task. In her face, the knowledge of the past and the vision of the future. And out of her clear eyes shone a spirit, fearless, undaunted; and her firm-lipped mouth smiled the courage of a warrior. At her feet a child played among rows, and endless rows of pale green cabbages.

I had seen it grow from day to day, as Dustan worked at it with the fervor of inspiration that allowed no interruption, and I knew something of what he was putting into it. But as he touched it with the last brush stroke, and turned to me for my appraisal, I said bluntly:

“It won’t go, Dustan. You’ve broken all the rules of art with that great beam of light in the foreground.”

He looked at me surprised, shocked. “It will go, Annette,” he retorted with conviction; “because it expresses a great truth. And art, true art, must be, and always is, an expression of truth.”

He got up from his seat and drew me back to a more natural range of perspective.

“Look at it!” he commanded. “Look at the woman’s face.”

I obeyed.

As I looked, the face of the woman seemed to glow with life, to come slowly out of the shadow and shine with a spiritual light that crowned the whole conception with an heroic meaning unmistakable. But I would not be convinced.

I said bitterly, "You are a great artist, Dustan, and a great painter; but your vision is awry in the distorted imagination of genius, which is likely to break out in marvelous misconceptions, false, often, even though they achieve beauty. The one thing of truth is the cabbages. Such are our days: rows and endless rows, of cabbages!"

"Annette —" It was plain that my criticism hurt Dustan, for his eyes grew dark and pained; "you didn't use to be so unseeing."

"I am of the soil now, and my perception is dulled."

"Voluntarily then." Dustan turned on me like a Judge. "Why should the relationship with the soil dull your perception? How deep is the earth? How broad? How varied? Where else are the elements of life itself? Everything is founded on the earth — 'The despised poor earth; the healthy, odorous earth' — and what is more enduring, except God? You don't know, have no idea, what this contact has done for you. You are differ-

ent, Annette; I can see that, but not *dulled*. The woman there is the embodied spirit of your life, the life of Mrs. Forest, and hundreds of such women, of the woman who had the strength, courage, to save her garden and her baby, too. Can't you see the wonderful heroism of that one act? "

" I can see nothing but the injustice of it, the cruelty. Look, I can give you the truth."

Turning swiftly, I caught up his drawing pad and charcoal from the bench and sketched rapidly; a toil bent, weary man and woman, a fretting horse and dog, all yoked to a plow, drawing long furrows in a barren field. Over them a cruel, hard faced monster with a mighty muscled arm wielded a heavy whip.

" There! " I said in triumph; " There is your ' Woman of the Farm,' her consort and associates; her comrades in the service of the Soil."

Dustan looked at it in silence for many minutes, his face grave.

" Yes," he said thoughtfully. " But when the plowing is done, these people will plant. You're overlooking their best crop." He indicated the bright head of the child. " As our war proved, the best men, as a class, came from the farms."

" They said so," I admitted grudgingly.

“ Like ‘ Tommy Atkins’ :

‘ It’s Tommy this; and Tommy that;

And Tommy how’s your soul?

But it’s “ First front rank for Atkins! ”

When the drums begin to roll.’ ”

Dustan’s grave face glowed with quick sympathy; he turned to me impetuously. “ Annette, dearest — ”

Paul’s voice interrupted from the kitchen.

“ Say, Puss. Your bread’s got loose, and is running amuck all over the kitchen.”

“ Oh, I forgot it! ” I broke away from Dustan and ran into the house. The bread which I had set for dinner, and forgotten, had overrun, and dropped in thick gobs down over the stove and floor, and receded to a sodden mass in the bottom of the pans.

“ How *could* I forget it? ” I wailed. “ No bread for dinner! And it’s so hot.”

It was no time for wailing. The men would arrive in half an hour for dinner. Hot biscuits were my only resource.

I stirred them hastily, and replenished the fire to the baking point, which brought the kitchen temperature up to 128°.

But the men must have bread though I burn to a cinder. So I provided it, trying to feel like a beautiful heroine, instead of a baked potato.

CHAPTER XII

EVERYTHING HAPPENED — BOOTLEG — AND VEEKY LAID AN EGG

Dustan went home soon after this, and how I missed him! Before he went, he pled with me for a real engagement, but I wouldn't consent. I didn't want to have anything to distract my attention from the big task of winning my farm. He wasn't very enthusiastic over my decision, but he had to accept it, as I couldn't see it in any other light.

After he was gone things began to happen. The most wonderful was a fat plum which fell into my lap, when I didn't even know there was a plum tree in sight.

A series of Harvest Drawings which I had made the first year after coming to the ranch, caught the attention of a mush manufacturer who offered me a thousand dollars for the exclusive rights, for cereal advertisements.

How I hugged myself! I sent the drawings on, and the check came promptly, with the intimation that they might be able to use more along the same lines, later on.

I didn't wait one minute — didn't even tell Paul. I just telephoned to the Dodge man to bring out a car. Celia was going to be home until early winter. Paul should have his chance.

When the car came, and Paul realized it was ours and how I got it, he just grabbed me up, set me on his shoulder and carried me all around the yard.

"Oh, Puss, you're a Brick!" he shouted, giving me a hearty smack as he set me down.

He took about five minutes to learn about the gears and things; and that night he took Celia to a show in Redlands.

I was so happy. That worry was over, and I was single minded to conquer my ranch problems.

The reaction came when two dreadful things happened in one week, and took all the money and more, that I had laid away with my left hand so that my right hand couldn't find it and pay it out to hired men.

I'd planned to have a new fall suit with part of it, and maybe take a week in the city; but the bubble began to swell up when Dolly, my Imported Ayrshire, about ready to calve, quite suddenly dropped her calf, dead, and died too.

It was certainly an awful blow to me. Mr.

Cattman had offered me a hundred dollars for the calf as soon as it was born. And Dolly was such a nice old cow, and a wonderful milker.

Jan said he couldn't understand it at all. He had let her out to drink the night before and she was as well as could be.

But why it was didn't make any difference; it *was*, and I had to stand it. That happened on Monday, and on Friday old Fritz, the cross-grained old German, while riding one of his team horses out to the field, had to fall off and break his leg.

Halleck said that Betsy had a loose shoe which caused her to stumble. All the men said it was Fritz's own fault, because Pat, who looked after such things, wanted him to wait and have the shoe nailed on, but he wouldn't stop, just scrambled up on her back, and went.

I'm sure I couldn't see where I was to blame in the least. I didn't ask him to get on the horse; he could just as well have walked to the field. And certainly I didn't urge him to fall off and break his silly old leg.

We rushed him to the hospital and did everything we could for him, and then he came back on me under the Farmer's Liability Act for damages.

I nearly collapsed when he demanded two hundred dollars; and Pat said:

“ Shure, an’ it’s no two hundred dollars I’d be givin’ him; his whole damn body ain’t worth two bits. Charge him up wit Dolly, the auld divil! fer it’s him that kicked ’er in the belly and killed her.”

“ Did he do that? ”

“ Shure, Miss. I’m not the one fer snitchin’, but I saw ’im do it. And all because the auld swateheart licked his ear a bit, as she had the habit. Don’t do it, Miss. If he gits to ravin’, I’ll pull off his other leg and choke ’im wid it.”

Of course I was grateful to Pat; but the law was all on old Fritz’s side, so I had to pay it.

Then I was advised to insure my men, which I did at another expense. I told Paul that I hoped the next one would get killed outright, for it would be a lot cheaper to bury one. Nobody paid me for my cow and calf.

All the neighbors felt sorry for me about my cow, and said it was a shame, for of course, no farmer sympathizes with the Liability Act for farmers. Unlike other vocations, the farmer works right along beside his men, and the same thing might happen to him any time. And who is he going to collect damages from? And certainly kicking my cow wasn’t one of old Fritz’s prescribed duties!

I told Halleck that the farmers ought to get together and have the act repealed. He agreed

with me, which I thought very decent of him since he was a hired man himself.

My indignation over this affair had just simmered down to resignation, when I discovered, what I had suspicioned before; my men were getting bootleg somewhere and bringing the fumes on their breath into my dining room. It was terribly annoying, not to say humiliating to me, because I counted myself a reputable citizen, bound to uphold the laws.

Paul and I talked it over. "It's got to stop," I said.

"Oh, for Lord's sake, don't say anything, Puss," cautioned Paul; "or Martha and I will have to put up the hay."

"I'm not going to say anything. But I'm going to do *something*. I've stood about all I'm going to from those miserable hired men."

I got up spiritedly, seized my can of soaked bread, and started out to feed my little chickens, my mind still milling over the problem. It was entirely possible that there was a still somewhere.

Before I reached the chicken yard I ran across Bolshevik, a small speckled hen whose lawless character had earned her the name. We called her Vecky, for convenience. I couldn't keep her any place. She scorned the confines of the yard, and the dull routine of the more

conservative hens. She roamed the pasture, helped herself to garden truck, scratched up my flowers semi-regularly, was always getting buried in the hay and having to be dug out, and laid an egg every day in the year, not overlooking the twenty-ninth of February!

Now she swung airily along planting her absurdly short legs alternately one in front of the other, singing raucously as she made for the garden.

I whistled for Zip and Zed.

Vecky was too few to resist, but not too brave to fly. She fled, squawking, into a fence corner overgrown by hoarhound in full seed, while the baffled dogs tore around her trying to frighten her out.

Fearing for her ultimate safety, I was forced to push my way through the weeds and bring her out by one leg, squalling dismally.

I was so *mad* at her! I threw her over into the yard, and spent the next fifteen minutes picking about a million tiny hoarhound burrs out of my clothes. Next to hired men, hoarhound burrs were my abomination. But one thing about them, they made you forget all your other troubles for the time being.

On Sunday, Bill and Charlie Graham went home, which was that much relief. On Monday morning I noticed the old familiar scent.

I wondered if the Grahams were in any way responsible for getting the stuff.

After breakfast they all went out to work. I saw Bill leave his team and come back to the bunk house. Directly I heard a wild commotion out in the barn lot.

I ran out in time to see the sorrel team galloping madly around the lot with the hay wagon careening after them between trees and buildings in the most perilous manner.

Bill came tearing out of the bunk house, and all the men ran and shouted "Whoa!" and tried to shoo the team into a corner, until Halleck grabbed the tail of the wagon, scrambled up, got hold of the lines and stopped the horses, with no casualties except a couple of broken corral posts where the wagon had hitched onto the corner in passing. I heard him curtly tell Bill that he'd better get next to himself about leaving that team standing.

Bill meekly climbed into the wagon and took charge of his team.

Drawing a deep breath of relief, I went back to the house, refilled the kerosene lamps, and put on a clean table-cloth, for Charlie Graham had upset his coffee cup at breakfast. He was terribly humiliated over it, though I told him it didn't matter. But the men guyed him unmercifully for being nervous.

After that Martha asked me if I would get some apples. The men wanted one of her famous apple puddings. Martha was an indulgent soul who still held a kindly feeling toward the childish sex, in spite of her three matrimonial adventures.

I got a pail and started for the orchard. As I passed the bunk house, Old Vecky strutted about on the porch. Knowing that she'd be on the beds directly, I stopped to shut the door which Bill in his wild exit, had left wide open.

The first thing that met my eye was a tall bottle standing on the table.

It looked suspicious. Nobody was around so I walked in and applied my nose to the cork.

Bootleg!

Undoubtedly Bill in his excitement had forgotten to take the usual precautions.

I picked it up to throw it out of the window on the cobblestones, but caution stayed my hand.

That bottle couldn't, of its own volition, jump out of the window. And when the men discovered it broken, they'd get even on somebody, which would most probably be their employers. As Paul said, he and Martha would have to put up the hay. Destroy it I meant to, but crude methods wouldn't do; subtlety must be the key!

I dismissed several ideas as inadequate and bungling. And not until Veeky paused at the door, craned in her neck and fixed me with her round, yellow eye, did real inspiration touch me with a directing finger.

I laughed out loud. "Come in, Veeky," I invited. Never loath for adventure, Veeky stepped in quite as if she understood.

My mind ran on. Suppose, just suppose that Veeky might take it into her head to walk across the floor and fly up on the table? What if she'd take a notion to scratch those matches, and cigarette papers and that half sack of Durham off to the floor, tip over the clock and knock the lantern off the table?

Suppose in her nest-making zeal she'd kick that bottle off, and it fell on that iron bar, somebody used for cracking nuts, so hard that it broke and spilled all its pepful contents? And if, after all this preparation, she chose to lay her egg on the table, who would blame her? Good old Veeky who laid an egg every day for somebody's breakfast!

I visioned so clearly that all of this happened before Veeky, being a trifle suspicious of my unusual welcome, withdrew herself through the door, and hopped off the porch.

That is, it all happened except the egg. That meant a quick visit to the egg box, and

a stealthy return. And there on the table, lay positive proof of Veeky's irretrievable blunder.

I went on and got the apples and helped Martha peel them, telling her to make the pudding extra large and sweet to atone, if possible, for Veeky's unwarrantable act.

Martha, who had lost her third husband by the John Barleycorn route, laughed immoderately and said that Veeky and I would be the death of her.

At noon when the men came in, they all made a good-natured dash for the wash basin. Matt Fergusson got it and in a few minutes left his four-fingered brand on the clean roller towel. He combed his stiff hair into a bristling pompadour and started for the bunk house.

Bill Graham made quick work of his toilet, and followed Matt. Charlie gave himself a "lick and a promise" and hastened after Bill, exclaiming,

"Heah, heah. I can't stan' you fellers!"

The two Dagos made a lightning job of the necessary rite, and took the same route.

Halleck Trent washed and combed quickly and deftly as usual, talking meanwhile to Paul who always waited for the others.

Martha and I left the dinner to cool while

we sneaked to a window commanding a view of the open bunk house door.

Matt, ahead, strode across the threshold and stopped. Dead silence.

Bill close on his heels stepped inside the door.

"Hell!" he ejaculated.

Charlie caught up with brisk stride, and the awful truth smote his understanding.

"What a devilish shame!" And one of the Portuguese behind him added, "Damned old hen!"

Then silence, grieved, portentous. They waited for Halleck.

"Careful there!" he called. "I'm on to you."

With quick, agile steps he stood among them, looked, and shared their pregnant silence. Then we heard his laugh break out, short, surprised, and full of genuine amusement. We saw him turn and slap Bill on the shoulder.

Shaking with mirth, Martha helped me hasten dinner on the table, and I rang the gong.

The men filed out of the door dejectedly, except Halleck, whom I saw, behind the rest, stoop and pick up something from the floor.

He was quiet at the meal, hardly rising to the jibes of the men, who discussed the matter of all chipping in and buying Bill a memory course.

Bill sulked, and Matt asked if I cared if they drowned Bill that afternoon.

"Why? What's Bill done?" I asked pleasantly.

"He's got such a fergetter," averred Matt. "He's done ruint us. We can't stand him! We'er goin' to drownd him."

"I'd rather you'd wait until next week," I protested graciously. "I hate to lose a good stacker like Bill."

Martha, bringing in the pudding just then, snickered consciously.

Halleck cast a quick look at her, an odd expression on his face, and helpfully shoved several dishes aside to make room for the pudding.

Diverted by the pudding's arrival, the men received their helpings, swallowed them, drowned in cream, and went out. Halleck, eating slowly, remained until after Paul had finished, and left the room.

Directly he rose too, and as he passed my chair, he stopped and laid beside my plate a shell hairpin set with six small brilliants which I recognized as my own.

"I found it," he said looking at me smilingly intent; "on the floor of the bunk house. It wasn't there this morning. I'm just wondering whether you or Martha was the hen."

CHAPTER XIII

TWO KINDS OF MEN SHOW THEIR METTLE

Two days later, our small community rang with the news that the Sheriff's men, on a tip from someone, had raided the Graham place and found a still in a ravine back of the house. Several jugs of liquor were found also and confiscated; and the whole family taken into custody.

I felt sorry for Lucy, poor girl! But they finally decided that she was innocent, and put the father on probation. Bill and Charlie were taken to jail for six months. I was glad, although I lost two good hay hands by it.

This necessitated two new men, which we found after some trouble. One, Bob Nooner, a nice faced chap whom Halleck greeted with joy as a buddy he had soldiered with in France.

The other called himself "Coke." He was the illest looking specimen I had ever boarded, red faced and blatant; absolutely the greatest braggart and poorest worker I had ever had the misfortune to enter on my time books. He was always the last to start to work and the first to quit the stack. And I think I never

looked in the direction of the hay wagon, but that he was reared back on his heels rolling a cigarette, while perhaps the other wagon waited for him to unload and get out of the way. And all the time I was scared to death for fear he would set the hay on fire.

I requested him not to smoke on the wagon or stack, but he grinned at me and said, "Oh, I'm very careful, Miss Torrel; there isn't a bit of danger."

I put up with his loud talk, his *dilletante* performance, and his smoking evils for three days, then Paul, getting out of patience, told him curtly to cut out the cigarette and get his wagon out of the way for the other load.

I happened to be going through the barn lot on one of my ever recurring chicken pilgrimages, so I stopped.

Coke scratched a match on his leg, leisurely lighted his smoke, and insolently flicked the match to the ground.

"If you don't like it, Perfessor, write 'er out."

Paul turned exasperatedly toward me. I stepped up to the wagon and said coldly,

"Very well. Come in and get your time."

Considerably taken back, he tried to laugh it off as a joke. But I paid him off and let him go.

The next hay crop brought an entirely new

set of men, except Halleck and Bob who had stayed to hoe the silo corn. There was a young man of the smart Alec type, named Jesse Littel, and an old man, tall and raw boned, whom the boys called Dad. He was an awfully odd looking old man, with a fringe of gray hair around his bald crown, and his kindly face was generally distorted by an enormous quid of tobacco in his gaunt cheek.

I set him to cutting the alfalfa in the orchard near the house, and I am sure that the variety and frequency of his oaths must have shocked the very horses — hardened, as they must have been, to florid language.

“Paul,” I said wearily; “isn’t it possible to have him expurgate his language a trifle? Speak gently, Paul,” I admonished.

Paul walked out into the orchard.

“See here, old man! You’ll have to cut out some of the language. My sister can hear every word you say.” I don’t think Paul tried to be polite.

The mower stopped on a turn. Dad shoved his old black hat back on his head, and spat a fountain of tobacco juice in Paul’s direction.

Looking out of the window, I saw the proceedings and began to calculate how long he had been there times the dollars per.

Dad reached back into his hind pocket,

brought out a dirty blue handkerchief and mopped his hot face. He looked at Paul a minute and laughed sheepishly.

“ I’ll be damned if you ain’t right, Son. Tain’t no kind of talk for the little lady. I’ll watch out. But that ole sorrel horse’s a son of a gun. Giddap! ”

Paul came back to the house and sank weakly into a chair.

“ Did you hear that, Puss? Did it happen, or am I dreaming? ”

I handed him a bottle of violet ammonia. “ Sniff this, dear,” I said compassionately. “ You’ll get over the shock.”

Paul declined my invigorator and got up. “ Oh, it’s a great life, Puss, if you don’t weaken.”

Two Saturdays later I said to Martha. “ The men expect to get through with the hay tonight.”

“ I’m mighty glad, Miss Annette,” exulted Martha wiping the back of her hot neck with her apron. “ I’d like never to see a hired man again.”

“ You’re not alone in that, Martha,” I said grimly; “ but what I started to say is: we ought to give them a treat. They’re a pretty nice bunch of men.”

Martha began to bustle about. Giving treats pleased Martha. It wasn’t all joy to

me, but it was customary in this section to give at least one treat during the summer, so I was bound to keep up the tradition.


Paul went to town after ice and we made a big freezer of ice cream. We baked cakes and killed a flock of chickens (so to speak). It took all afternoon, and just before supper, Celia drove in looking fresh as a daisy in her white linen frock and sport hat.

I was terribly hot and tired, but Celia put new life in me. And after a bath and fresh clothes, I felt fit again. I persuaded her to stay for supper telling her who was to comprise the party.

The men thought her wonderful, I could see by the way they divided their attention between her and the fried chicken.

The enormous plates of fried chicken, browned as only Martha knew how, disappeared as if by magic; the cakes were much appreciated, and Paul and Martha could hardly dig the ice cream out fast enough. Every man ate with the relish and abandon of childhood. I really couldn't see why some of them didn't burst, — but fortunately, no one did.

After they were all stuffed, I asked them into the living room to hear Celia sing.

Celia never sang sweeter, I know, nor had a more appreciative audience. She played  the

piano, and Paul played his violin, while she sang song after song. The men relaxed to the music; there was a sympathetic understanding about Celia that made her akin to the whole world.

Halleck told me that Bob could sing, so we asked him to do so. He was embarrassed and reluctant at first, but when he got going, his really good baritone voice supported Celia's wonderfully well. They sang a lot of army songs, and everyone joined in. Our house hadn't rung with such a joyful noise since the first summer when the Bunch was there.

It brought Zed whining to the door. I opened it and he came in, but he ran around whining and barking so loudly, that Paul laid down his violin and took him out.

Dad reached out a timid hand and picking up the violin, tentatively drew the bow across the strings.

"Do you play, Dad?" I asked.

"I used to." His dim old eyes looked wistful as he started to lay the instrument back on the table.

"Play something," I urged.

"Go on, Dad. Give us a tune," insisted the boys.

He cuddled the fiddle (as he called it) under his chin and his knotted old fingers reached

stiffly for the strings. Somehow it went to my heart.

He played little old jig tunes that nobody had ever heard, but they were pleasing, and we all applauded.

Once when he finished, Celia clapped her hands, her bright face glowing.

"I know that." She repeated it on the piano. "It's 'The Yellow Rose of Texas.' My grandfather used to sing it, and I learned it to play for him. Do you know the words? Play it again and I'll sing it.

He pressed forward eagerly, gaunt, grizzled and soil stained, and began playing.

Celia stood up beside him, her shining head thrown back, a smile in her eyes and on her lips. It was like a white petaled flower blooming at the root of a gnarled old tree stump. He played the simple melody and she sang.

"You may talk about your Nancy girls
And sing of Rosy Lee;
But the Yellow Rose of Texas
Beats the belles of Tennessee."

There were six stanzas after the fashion of old songs, and Celia sang them all.

Halleck, watching with a child's look on his face, fully appreciating Celia's art, turned to me with a smile.

I smiled in return, but I did not hear what

he leaned forward to say, for Zed came tearing back to the porch, barking furiously. Paul quietly shut the door on him. I heard one of the cows low from the stable, and a horse neigh long and urgently.

"There must be something around," I said, half to myself.

Nobody paid any attention because we were all taken up with the song. Light and liltingly sweet, it evidently carried the old man back forty years, for his rugged old face was soft and tender. Perhaps Celia took the place of the Yellow Rose long since faded and dead. The song ended as it had begun simply, in a silence that satisfied.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Dad laid down the violin, and Celia turned to close the piano.

The men began to move. Littrel got up first saying that he had had a "swell time," and thanked me. This brought the others to their feet with awkward compliments.

"Come in again, Boys," said Paul as they all tramped out with hearty good nights.

As the door closed behind them, Zed, who was still barking, leaped crazily on the porch, and then I heard Littrel shout:

"Torrel! For God's sake! The place is burning up!"

“What! Where? Oh, Zed *tried* to tell us!”
I was the first one out.

There against the starlit sky great clouds of dense black smoke poured upward; and licking, scarlet flames darted in and out around the gables of my barn. And again came the shrill, frightened scream from the stalls.

“Paul!” I shrieked; “The horses!”

We all ran; Celia in her spotless linen close to my elbow, and Martha puffing along in the rear. As we ran we could hear the plunging of the imprisoned horses, maddened by heat and smoke.

Halleck and Bob, outstripping the other men, flung open the big door, and the acrid smoke clouds rolled out.

By the light of the flames we could see the terrified animals rearing and straining at their halters, and kicking at the burning brands which fell through the roof and set fire to the loose straw at their feet, and their quivering sides were black with sweat.

“Throw the harness on, and cut the halter ropes,” Halleck shouted.

All the men darted into the burning building through the smoke and flames that flickered like fire flies across the straw-strewn floor.

I clung to Paul, for he, about as helpless as we women, stayed with us. Celia, on my other

side was crying, "Oh, the poor horses! Will they get them out, Annette? Just *look* at the flames!" Martha paced up and down, wringing her hands. Zed ran round and round us whining.

"Zed *tried* to tell us, Paul," I said. "Why *didn't* we pay some attention to him!"

Inside the barn we could see the men moving swiftly, dodging in and out among the plunging horses. It seemed forever until Littrel came running out with the unbroken grey mare, a saddle cloth tied over her head.

He shouted to Paul to take her, and ran back.

Matt Fergusson came next with the wild eyed blacks snorting and rearing. Dad crowded him with the sorrel team, the harness awry, slipping off their ash strewn backs. Jan carried out a squealing pig and tossed it over the fence.

Littrel appeared again with old Betsy shivering, her ears flat against her head, and Bob close behind with Pearl, her mate. Littrel got out; but a burning brand struck Pearl's nose. She reared and wheeled back dragging Bob with her.

Celia screamed, and Martha ran up and down wailing. I couldn't even think, but Zed leaped through the door, barking furiously. And nip-

ping at her heels, brought her out with Bob clinging to the halter.

“ Oh you darling, darling dog! ” cried Celia, and we clapped our hands frantically.

Celia cried out again. “ I’m afraid the roof is going to fall! Where’s Mr. Trent? ”

I started toward the stable. “ I never thought about the men, Celia; I was thinking only of the horses.” Running forward I shrieked distractedly: “ Come out! Come out! The roof is going to fall! ”

Nobody could hear my voice for the crackle and roar of the flames. The heat drove me back to where Celia and Martha clung together.

“ Why don’t the child come out? ” cried Martha.

The rafters began to curl and break, and then we saw Halleck Trent come running, hatless, a wide burn across his cheek, jerking Paul’s saddle horse after him, the uncinched girth flapping. Instantly the roof caved and fell in a seething, flame engulfed mass, barely missing the horse’s rump as he leaped clear.

I struck my hands together. “ Thank Heaven! The horses are safe.”

As he ran past me Halleck handed me a pigeon’s nest with two fat, naked squabs crowding each other. “ The old ones flew out,” he said as he hurried on.

I took the little creatures, remembering that only yesterday I had seen the nest on the sill and the mother pigeon flying up there with a worm in her beak. He must have had to climb to get them.

Celia caught my arm and pointed up to the flaming center gable.

"Look, Annette! Look up there in the window!"

My eyes followed her pointing finger. High, near the roof in the open space of the hay loft, against a background of roaring crimson fire, tottered a hen with wide-spread, fluttering wings.

"It's Vecky!" I screamed. "Fly, Vecky! Jump! Come, Chicky, Chicky, Chicky!" But with a despairing flop and squall she fell back-ward into the billowing flames. Poor Vecky! She had so loved to scratch in the new hay!

"Oh, Miss Annette! Ain't it awful!" Martha came up beside me again, wringing her hands and wiping her streaming eyes with her apron. "What have you got there?" she demanded.

"The pigeons' nest. Halleck saved it."

"Bless the child for bringing out the poor, helpless things!" Martha took the birds out of my hands and began mothering them against

her bosom. The fire grew hotter and we had to move back.

The main peak of the roof sagged, cracked, collapsed. The flames twisted and swung, leaping higher with a surge of smoke and shining sparks. As the burning cinders fell about us in showers, I heard Dad say,

“ I’m ’feared them sparks ’ll fall on that outside stack; and if it goes, the cow barn ’ll go surer’n hell.”

I clutched Celia’s arm. “ Heavens! Is everything going to burn? ”

I saw Halleck’s face for an instant in the fire glare, intent, then he swung around.

“ Get the blankets out of the bunk house, wet ’em and cover the stack. And let’s get the cows out while we can.”

The men ran to the bunk house and returned with armfuls of heavy comforts and blankets. These they wet in the irrigating ditch close by and spread on the stack. Three of the men got up on the cow barn and patrolled the roof for burning brands.

As one fell, it was extinguished with the water the rest of us handed up in buckets. We women could bring water, and how we worked, running back and forth. Celia’s white dress was a muddy ruin, and I could hear Martha’s hoarse breathing as she stumbled past me.

"You ought to stop, Martha," I gasped. I knew she must be about all in, for my knees shook under me and the buckets of water seemed to weigh a ton.

At last the fire burned itself out, and the blazing brands ceased to fall. Dad told us we needn't carry any more water. We all stopped and looked at each other, a wet, draggled bunch beside the dying fire.

As I looked at the smoking ruin of my barn, I thought of all that hay, and poor old Veeky. I wanted to sit down and howl. But it wasn't time to howl. It was to think of making people comfortable. Celia looked ready to drop, and I knew by the droop of Martha's eyelids that her head was beginning to ache. The men too, looked wan and tired under the soot on their faces. Paul came up to me saying:

"Sis, these men haven't any beds."

I turned toward them. "We have plenty of room. Come into the house to sleep."

They looked at each other awkwardly, then down at their wet and blackened clothes. I saw that they did not want to accept my invitation.

Halleck spoke for them all.

"Somebody ought to sit up and watch the fire, a wind might come up. We can dry our

blankets by the heat. We're too dirty to come into the house."

"Would you rather?" I said. "It doesn't seem right when you are all so tired. I can't thank you all enough for saving the horses — and everything." I was about ready to cry.

Dad patted me on the shoulder with his sooty hand.

"That's all right, Sissy. You git on and go to bed. You're all tuckered out — all of you." He included Paul in the paternal sweep of his hand.

"I'm so sorry about Vecky," I lamented. I happened to glance at Halleck.

He shook his head solemnly. "The Federal Dry Agents have sure lost a good pal!"

I laughed hysterically.

Paul said, "Come on, Sis. Celia's all in."

We said good night and went. Once we looked back. The men were all busily propping their bedding up on sticks, a curious scene of big black squares and black legged silhouettes against the smouldering red ruins.

Paul told us that the men all blamed Littrel for the fire, as he was smoking in the hay mow when he pitched down hay to his team. Dad had cautioned him, but he had laughed in his smart Alec way and told Dad to go comb what was left of his hair.

The next morning after breakfast Paul took the men into town. They all came except — Littrel, and told me good bye. He had very little to say, and we decided, if he wasn't guilty of the fire, he acted awfully conscious about it.

Later in the day Francis Boalt, having heard of the fire, came over. Celia had remained all night, but went home during the forenoon. Paul and I took him out to see the ruins.

Martha, Halleck, Bob and Jan joined us. It was the most exciting thing that had happened at the ranch since old Fritz's accident.

The hay still smouldered sullenly, and the acrid smell of smoke filled the air. At Francis Boalt's inquiry, I unhesitatingly laid the blame onto young Littrel, adding viciously, "He ought to be hanged!"

Francis Boalt agreed with me, unconditionally and instanced another similar case that he had known.

Bob, who was of the argumentative type and I thought, to annoy Francis Boalt, chose to take it up and defend Littrel's possible innocence.

"But if he was seen smoking on the hay mow the evidence is very much against him," said Mr. Boalt judicially. "It's the most foolish thing possible to do."

"But that don't prove he set the fire," per-

sisted Bob; "besides they couldn't do anything with him, if it was proved; he didn't do it on purpose; and everybody smokes in the barn."

"For that very reason, it should be a punishable offense," stated Mr. Boalt warmly; "because they all know what risks they're involving."

"Yes," I broke in, beginning to realize the monetary loss; "if there was some way to make them pay, they'd be more careful. There should be some way to make them consider the matter less lightly."

"It 'ud be pretty hard on a poor devil with just his day's wages," argued Bob. "I reckon Littrel was sorry enough."

"Sorry? Dammit!" Paul cut in irascibly. "What does that amount to? That doesn't buy anything! The confounded bounders come along here with the seat out of their trousers, and not enough in their pockets to buy a whiff of Durham; and if we farmers have scraped ten cents together, they want to destroy it, and expect us to like it; burn up two thousand dollars' worth of property, and then be *sorry!* Confounded asses!"

"Paul!" I remonstrated.

"I beg your pardon, Annette." Paul pulled himself up. "But what in the dickens has *sorry* got to do with a loss like this?"

“Regrets can never make up for material loss,” supplemented Francis Boalt. “And in a case like this, are of no appreciable value.”

The allusion to empty pockets and worn pants hit Bob pretty hard, that being very near his condition on his arrival. He got red and angry.

“All that ain’t proving that Littrel set the hay on fire,” he repeated stubbornly. “Dad smoked; I smoked; and Halleck smoked.”

Halleck turned quickly; “You’re talking wild, Bob; but you make another point against your own argument,” he said shortly. “You fellows want to smoke on the hay and if it burns up, it can be laid on anybody. I’ve never smoked around the barn or stacks since I’ve been here, and I’ve tried to keep the rest of them from doing it.” He looked directly at me as he spoke.

“Well,” I remarked; “it’s burned anyway, and I suppose we can’t bring it back, no matter who is to blame.” I turned toward the house. It wasn’t very dignified standing in the barn lot quarreling with one’s hired men.

“No.” Francis Boalt followed me. “Placing the blame doesn’t help matters. Have you any insurance, Miss Annette?”

CHAPTER XIV

SO SHE THOUGHT THE FARM NEEDED A MANAGER

No, I didn't have any insurance except a trifle on the barn along with the other buildings, but at Francis Boalt's advice I insured the rest of my hay. Also I was obliged to go to considerable expense to build a new barn. But that seemed to be all in the ups and downs of farming, which must be taken for better or for worse like a life partner.

One day while rummaging in an old desk, I found a little account book full of crabbed writing, which I recognized as Uncle Nat's.

I turned over the leaves. It contained items of buying and selling, money paid and received, dates of disastrous frosts or snows, when time to plant potatoes and the record of the ground-hog days in certain years.

Along with such odds and ends I found a page of

“Ten Don'ts for Farmers.”

They were full of pith and wisdom.

“Don't fail to be proud you're a farmer.

“Don't bite easy.

“Don't plant more than you can take care of.

“ Don’t raise more stock than you can feed.

“ Don’t fail to get married. A farmer needs a working partner.

“ Don’t treat your bills like your wife’s relations; meet them promptly and have it over.

“ Don’t be too generous with the man who owes you; maybe the man you owe needs it worse.

“ Don’t squeeze the eagle ’till he hollars, but hang onto his tail ’till he promises to bring home a mate.

“ Don’t fail to speak well of your farm; you’re part of it.

“ Don’t neglect to woo your farm like a sweetheart, visit with it like a neighbor, take care of it like a mare in foal, and work it like a dog.

“ Don’t neglect farm management. If you can’t do it, get help.”

I transferred the book to my own desk and pondered over the advice, trying to decide which one of the maxims hit me most specifically. I felt perhaps the last was the one designed for me. If poor old Uncle Nat could come back and view my futile attempts at farm management, I am afraid he’d be reluctant to return to the joys of Paradise and leave his beloved farm in my bungling hands.

“ If you can’t do it, get help.”

At this moment I heard Halleck Trent's cheerful whistle as he came in from the barn and paused at the kitchen door. I went in to see what he wanted.

He stood outside the kitchen door bare headed, his face more boyish looking than on the first day he had come. He carried a hatful of eggs which he had found in the stack. As he transferred them from his hat into the basket that I held out to him, I said:

"You seem to know a good deal about farming, Halleck; did you ever have anything to do with the management of a farm?"

"Yes, once." He hesitated. "I sort of run a ranch for an old man for a couple of years."

"Did you give satisfaction?" I enquired.

"Er — I guess I did — for a couple of years."

"What happened after that?"

"Well, you see, Miss Torrel," Halleck Trent laid the three last eggs into the basket and shook the straw out of his hat. "He was an old man with a young wife; and that's generally a hard combination for a young fellow to buck."

I smiled. "Why?"

"Old men are always jealous," he said wisely.

"Of young men?" I asked.

He nodded, his face serious, yet frank as a child's as he turned and sat back against the

edge of the kitchen table. He explained ingenuously.

"They haven't any sense either, and they don't believe in themselves like — well like young fellows do. Their day is past, you know. In this case he was old, cranky and rich, and she was young and pretty. Her folks made her marry him."

"Poor child!" I murmured sympathetically, and waited for the story.

"Nobody could blame her, though he was good to her — you know — treated her like a pet poodle on a string. She had plenty of eats and a cosy corner to lie in, but she wasn't that kind. She wanted to dress and go. He didn't; and he was always on hand like a sore thumb.

"I was sorry for her a long time before I said anything. Maybe she knew it; anyway she was young, and so was I. I don't mean I was in love with her," he said hastily.

I nodded understandingly, and he continued.

"I went into the kitchen one night after some soap and she was sitting there crying like the dickens. Of course I ought to have gone out and shut the door; but she knew it was me, and began to cry worse. And — well, its kind of hard to get by a crying woman. She was the kind that crying don't hurt much, curly hair and — like that."

“ I see.”

“ I stopped and asked the trouble. It wasn't anything new. It had just struck her worse than usual and — she needed a little of the right sort of petting.”

“ So you gave it to her.”

“ Well,” — He laughed and flushed consciously, asking with his eyes for my leniency. “ I forgot about my soap. I put my arms around her and said things I wished I hadn't. But it would have been all right if the old man hadn't popped in on us. What he didn't know wouldn't have hurt him. But he opened the door — and — of course he didn't understand — ”

“ Naturally.”

“ He kicked over the bean pot and began to rave. I tried to tell the old geezer it was all right, Fanny was true as steel (which was the truth) and if he'd lay off on her for a while, let her have some young company and go places some times without him taggin', she'd be as happy as a bird.

“ But he wouldn't listen; just kept ravin' wilder the more I talked, so I said ‘ Good bye, Fanny,’ put on my hat and walked out. It's been the high road for me since, until I came here.” His voice dropped as at something final.

“Then you’ve had some experience?”

“Yes, some. I suppose you might call it that,” he admitted modestly. “But,” searching my face; “it wasn’t serious.”

“I mean at managing a farm.”

“Oh — Yes, I stayed there two years. That was after the war.”

“I’m just thinking,” I said. “I’m wondering —” I paused. It seemed difficult, somehow, to promote my hired man to the dignity of Manager. I wasn’t quite sure of the procedure. “How would you like to take over the job of running this farm?” I finished abruptly.

His face flushed all over, and his clear eyes opened in astonishment.

“I — I don’t know exactly what you mean, he stammered. “You’re not going to quit farming, are you?”

I shook my head gloomily. “I can’t quit,” I confessed; “for a while yet. But I’ll have to quit — in the hole — if things don’t go better. I’ve farmed for nearly three years, and haven’t learned anything except that I *don’t* know anything. And — I’ve simply got to have help.”

He looked at me with his frank, child expression and said seriously:

“Tell me all about it, Miss Torrel.”

CHAPTER XV

THEN ANOTHER ONE PROPOSED

Paul was considerably peeved over my elevation of Halleck Trent as Manager of the farm, but Halleck's first move, after I had explained everything — even to the conditions and restrictions of Uncle Nat's will, was to win Paul's co-operation, a thing I had never been able to do.

We did not make much difference as to his status on the ranch. I raised his "wages" to the dignity of a "salary" and had him move into the house in a room next to Paul's.

I own that I was surprised at the vigor and hard headed sense with which he attacked the problem for which I could see no solution. To be sure, he was born on a ranch, and had had still more experience besides the two years on Fanny's husband's ranch. But the veneer of city life had attracted him, the froth of dance hall, bathing beach and joy parks had held him, and made him light and soft. Now, however, he seemed to reach down into an under surface strata of harder substance that I had not been sure was there.

His slogan was "Tend to business," and his favorite remark was: "I want to get at it and get through." Besides this prompt attention toward getting the work done, he suggested that one avenue toward success might be to cut down expenses.

I agreed, and by some process unknown to me, he got Paul into the notion to take over the cows and so dispense with Jan, who, as a professional milker, demanded the wage for such.

I hadn't seen Paul so enthusiastic since the day we first heard of our legacy. Of course we had to get a milking machine, but that was a small cost compared to Jan's yearly wage. Halleck said that he and Bob could manage the ranch work except at haying and silo filling time, when we would need extra men. I decided with so few to cook for, that I might as well let Martha go and save that expense.

The plan seemed to be working very well. I was satisfied with my part. It was such a relief not to have to think all the time and plan about the things of which I knew so little.

Francis Boalt disapproved of my step. He said, on his next visit as we sat in my living room, "I regret, Miss Annette, that you didn't ask my advice. I assure you, it is, and always will be, a great pleasure to give you the benefit of my older experience."

“ Thank you Mr. Boalt,” I said. “ I appreciate your kindness and interest, but I feel that if I ever expect to be able to make decisions for myself, I ought to begin, and not depend entirely on the judgment of others, no matter how willing my friends are to help me.”

“ But,” Francis Boalt matched the tips of his still scholarly fingers; “ a step such as this is attendant with undeniable risk. A man, such as this young Trent, who comes quite without recommendation, I understand? ”

I assented. “ Except his record while here on the ranch, which has been good, so far.”

“ These wandering adventurers often stand the test for a few months,” he reminded me with dignity; “ but when a man has reached his age and arrived at no particular destination, there is some reason. His age, as I say, is about that of my son. Timothy has one of the largest law practices in Chicago.”

“ You forget,” I said; feeling moved to defend my Manager; “ Halleck Trent served in France during the greater part of the war. Our soldier boys have lost considerable time which they will have to make up.”

I said this not without design, because I knew — Mary had told me — that Timothy Boalt had taken a lot of pains and trouble to get exemption from the draft.

"True," he conceded. "And perhaps we should consider it our duty to help them back to the normal plane; but I don't feel that you should take the risk of doing so, Miss Annette."

"As well one risk as another," I confessed. "I was daily juggling with my chance of winning the ranch, and I think I wasn't proving a very clever juggler either."

He lifted his palm in protest. I don't know what he meant to convey by this evident desire to stop my confession, but I stopped just to humor him. I think he didn't intend, right then, to say the thing he did; but Halleck Trent's promotion evidently worried him. And I presume that even an elderly barrister's feelings might overcome him at times.

I experienced a dreadful sensation as if I had been standing on solid ground and it suddenly began to slip. I tried to stop him.

"Mr. Boalt!" I stammered. But accustomed to uninterrupted argument, Francis Boalt went right on pleading his case. My small attempt was futile.

I felt dreadfully, though I couldn't see why he need want to get married when he had such a splendid cook and housekeeper as Mary.

I sat stock still until he finished, simply overwhelmed with remorse and a feeling of base in-

gratitude. I really *liked* Francis Boalt, and he had been so kind to Paul and me ever since we had come to the ranch. My face certainly couldn't have inspired much encouragement, or hope, for I just sat there shocked and dummy-like and looked him straight in the eyes. Finally I said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Boalt," and shook my head.

I felt worse when he at last understood that my decision was final. He rose to go. There were lines on his face that I had not noticed before, lines that spoke of age and weariness. Even then perhaps I did not fully realize or appreciate Francis Boalt's desire and need for a wife. Yet I knew that life must be very lonely for a man like him in that old house, with only hired people to help him break the silence, waiting, as he waited for the son who had shaken off the shackles of the land. Perhaps there was only one thing that would ever bring Timothy Boalt back to the farm — for a few days. Then doubtless it would pass into other hands.

This went through my mind as we shook hands in parting, he assuring me that he would ever consider it a privilege to assist me in any way possible.

I thanked him, and remained standing there while he went down the steps. He struck his

heel on the last step and stumbled, catching himself uncertainly as an old man.

With his criticism of Halleck Trent in my mind, I asked Halleck one day why he hadn't got something together.

A quick flush reddened his face, but he answered in his usual guileless manner, "I never could see any reason for it before. Now," he smiled; "I want to beat the Odd Fellows. And," he added; "I want to help you."

The fall progressed, a mediocre season that year, with monotonous sunny days, and nights with a cool tang as if spring had come again.

It rained during silo filling and hay chopping time and delayed the work, yet it was fine to start the feed and the plowing.

With his habit of "getting at it" Halleck put on the teams and got the grain in early before the winter rains set in. This was very fortunate because when it did really get down to raining toward the last of December, it hardly stopped.

The winter was lonely with just we four, the three men and myself. Celia was away in the city, and I missed Francis Boalt's habit of calling frequently.

To be sure he came sometimes, far between, but things were different. Though he tried to be very generous about Halleck Trent, I could

see that the satisfaction Halleck gave in the new rôle, irked him.

I missed Martha too, more than I had thought possible. I suppose it was because she being a woman, her interests and mine fell naturally along the same lines.

I had my housework, and Dustan's letters as well as those of other friends. Sometimes Bob came in of an evening for cards or music which helped the time away. Paul was fond of cards, and he and Celia wrote to each other; but I think letters aren't as much to a man as to a woman.

We read a great deal, and went to a few shows in Redlands. They were mostly things several months old in the city, but they were new to us. Yet the roads were bad with the rain and it seemed a long way to go for the enjoyment of an hour or two; and we had to consider the expense. We must make everything count because our time was going fast; we couldn't afford to take any unnecessary chances.

The lack of amusement gave me time to draw and paint for the mush manufacturer. It wasn't the art that I had once striven for, but it won far greater publicity and appreciation; perhaps of the only kind I should ever win. And the checks came in very handy

to stop leaks and gaps, and bolster up our fortunes.

So we got through the winter which at last merged into spring.

CHAPTER XVI

“IN THE SPRING A YOUNG MAN’S FANCY” —
TAKES A CURIOUS TURN

The spring, I think, was the loveliest season I had ever seen, even for a Stonehouse County spring.

A city spring is marked chiefly by the opening of the shops, by displays of spring goods and millinery, either in the windows or on the streets. True, the sky is a little bluer, the grass in the parks more spontaneous, the English sparrow more insolent, and there is the scent of violets in the gardens. But here the spring was truly an apocalypse.

With so much moisture we had little frost. February continued the warm, misty rains that delighted the stock men, as it meant lush grass for the cattle. In March the flowers began to appear: pussy beds and johnny-jump-ups and the wild white cyclamen which the children call shooting stars. But April was the glory of the season, when the wild lupin ran over the hills in great sweeps and washes of purple like spilled wine from a shattered flagon.

The oats in the field next the orchard were as high as a man's waist. I loved to watch that grain when the wind swept through, tossing and twisting it in long green billows like an emerald sea; and underneath one knew that the quail was making her nest and the baby rabbits were hiding away from the hawks.

One evening after an April day of cloud and sun, I sat alone in the living room by the fire, for Paul had gone some place, and Halleck was spending the evening with Bob, who was going to leave.

I was making out Bob's time, for the urge of spring was on him, and he had given notice. We didn't want him to go, we all liked him; but he wanted to move, so that's all there was to it.

The rising wind outside kept leaping in at the open window rattling the blind and billowing the curtain into the room. It disturbed the light; and made the flame blacken the chimney.

I got up to close the sash, and as I did so I heard the faint bleat of a lamb away from its mother. I listened several minutes until it came again, the plaintive cry of a chilled, lost lamb. It came from the grainfield, and I knew that nothing could live in that cold, wet grain all night.

Closing my time book, I turned down the

light and went to my bed room after a sweater and cap.

When I came back, Halleck stood at the door, bare headed, with the collar of his dark blue sweater pulled up around his ears.

"All alone? Where's Paul?" he asked. "May I come in?"

"Yes. But I'm just going out. One of the lambs is down there in the field; I hear it crying."

He bent his head to listen, then shook it negatively, though I could hear the cry plainly.

"Stand here," I said, and he moved to my side. We stood there so still I could hear his heart beat. The cry came, plaintive, urgent.

Halleck took me by the arm. "Get your rubbers; it's pretty wet in that grain."

I showed him my well protected foot, and we started.

Everything had been dripping with rain, but the wind had shaken the foliage dry as Monday's wash. Ragged gray clouds scudded across the sky revealing here and there a star-studded patch of blue. The trees against the horizon showed dark silhouettes, but nearby things were dimly visible in the gray light of the hidden moon.

We said little. Halleck guided me around or over the puddles and across the bridge above

the swift-flowing black waters of the creek.

The tasseled branches of the oaks writhed and bent under the will of the wind, tender twigs, torn from their stems were flung against our faces. And high up in the stormy sky the cry of wild geese on their lonely migration sounded strangely through the night.

Once I stumbled over a fallen branch. Halleck said, "Watch your step," and took me more closely under his protection. We walked through the orchard, climbed the board fence and stood at the edge of the billowing field to listen.

The bleat came pitifully, a hundred feet to the left.

Halleck took my arm again and we plunged into the tossing grain. The clouds parted over the face of the moon; at the same time a fine, stinging rain struck our faces. The wind seized my cap like a teasing school boy, and flung it out into the swaying grain. I felt as if unseen hands were making sport of me.

"Halleck, my cap!" I cried, bewildered. Everywhere I looked the oats, waist high, bent and rocked and made long curving green troughs like the trough of an ocean wave. They rose, straightened and twisted again like living things, glistening gray-green and wet in the cold silver moonlight.

Halleck found the cap and set it on my head, pulling it down securely and tucking my ears under it.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’ll get lambkin. I know right where he is. Don’t move. I might not be able to find you again.” He laughed as one uttering a monstrous impossibility.

I stood very still, in my bewilderment quite sure if Halleck should lose me, I should have to stand there and wail like the lamb until someone came and found me.

He returned in a few minutes with a shivering bundle in his arms around which he had wrapped his sweater.

“It’s not dead?”

“No, no. Just wet and cold and hungry. He wants his mammy.” He took my hand and laid it on the bundle. I could feel the life pulsing through it. Then with the lamb encircled in one arm Halleck took me on the other, and we went back through the wet orchard, the trees shedding rain drops on us as we passed under.

I clung closely to his arm for the way was unfamiliar in the dim light, and the sound of the dark, cold water gurgling under the bridge filled me with a kind of terror, as if underneath, black hearted water-demons waited to reach up

with sinewy fingers to catch my feet as we passed over. The lamb too, snuggled close to his shoulder for warmth. Zed, missing me from the house, came running and barking, to meet us; but he quieted at Halleck's low command.

I had noted before Halleck's gentle consideration for helpless things, and I felt it more keenly that night as I saw him hold the tiny lamb to its mother's warm udder until comforted and strengthened, it stopped shivering. We left it in the corral with its mother and went back to the house.

At the door Halleck stopped, put his arms around me and said quietly, with a strong pleading in his voice that puzzled me,

"Annette, kiss me."

I should have felt offense at his touch, his request; but I did not. I don't know why. Perhaps I was like Fanny. At any rate, without analyzing my own motive I unhesitatingly gave my lips to his. His face was cold against mine, and wet with rain.

He opened the door for me and smiled as I passed through.

"Good night," he said and closed the door after me with a sharp bang to overcome the force of the wind.

I stood there for a moment after he was gone.

There was no offense in his touch; and yet — was it necessary or wise for me to kiss my Manager?

Paul's voice broke the thread of my thought.

“ Quite a bunch of letters tonight, Puss. I just got back. Where have you been? ”

I joined him at the fireplace. “ Down in the grainfield after one of the lambs. I heard it crying. Halleck went with me.” I held out my hand for the letters.

On top lay a thick white envelope which bore Dustan's aristocratic hand writing.

The next day being bright and sunny so that the men could work, I saw little of Halleck Trent. At breakfast we met during the meal, and at dinner, but after supper he remained to tell me that Bob's time record was a little different from mine. What should he do about it?

Brisk and business like as usual, he drew Bob's account from his pocket and we went over the list together.

“ I'm sorry Bob is going,” I said. “ He is a good hand. It wouldn't be possible to persuade him to stay? ”

He looked at me intently as if searching for something underneath my remark.

“ I don't think so,” he answered, dropping his eyes from my face; “ especially since that other man came.”

He referred to a man who had come by late in the afternoon and asked for a job. I had hired him, knowing that Bob expected to leave in the morning.

"I'd rather keep Bob. Here's the mistake. He's counted two rainy days, but let it go." I wrote the check, and Halleck went out.

I washed my dishes, and when I went into the living room, Paul had gone out. I poked up the fire and sat down to read. After a while I heard a crash from the direction of the corrals. I knew what had happened. Raghorn, the bull, had broken the fence and was out.

I ran out to the bunk house to tell someone; perhaps Paul was out there. I stopped at the window and looked in. The new man lay asleep on a bed. Paul was not there. Bob and Halleck sat at the table playing cards. At least they had been playing. Evidently they had stopped to smoke and talk. I heard Halleck say:

"There's not a bit of sense in your going. We're not through with you."

"What are you so damn stuck on stayin' for?" retorted Bob. "You promised me if I'd stay till spring, you'd quit and go North with me."

I didn't catch Halleck's answer. But, interested to see if either would influence the

other, I remained quiet outside the window.

The argument had evidently gone on for some time for Bob said:

“ You’re playin’ me a dirty trick, Hal. Course you wouldn’t be Manager up there — ”

“ Aw, cut that out, Bob! ”

“ Then why are you just plain throwin’ me down? ”

Halleck impatiently threw himself back in his chair and studied the burning end of his cigarette. I couldn’t see his face for the shadow of his hand across it. He didn’t answer.

“ I know,” taunted Bob. “ *I* know what’s the matter with you! ”

“ You don’t,” Halleck’s voice denied quickly. “ You’re a damn poor guesser. But I’ll tell you — ” He glanced toward the sleeping man on the bed and continued in a sort of bravado, speaking in his faulty French,

“ *J’ai l’intention espouser cette femme.* ”

He got up. “ I heard that damn bull break in a minute ago. We’ll have to go put him out. ”

I darted back from the window and flew to the house hot with fury. So Halleck Trent remained in my service because he intended to marry the ranch! The insolent young fool! Well he would get a chance to keep his promise to Bob. His time ceased with tonight.

Raging inwardly and outwardly, I got out my time book and got so far as to make out Halleck Trent's check in full. My cheeks flamed as I recalled Francis Boalt's warning and my own unhesitating kiss the night before, and I almost choked in my anger.

Suddenly I cooled. The calculating tendency of the Manheims came uppermost. Hundreds of men had had intentions that never reached fruition. Halleck Trent was a useful man to me; where could I replace him just now? I had told Paul that I was going to have this farm, *nothing* should stand in my way. Very well. Let Halleck Trent "intend," and be hanged!

A step sounded on the porch, and my gorge rose again as Halleck Trent's face showed at the window, for I had not lowered the blind. He tapped the pane. "Time for your beauty sleep, Mademoiselle, 10.30."

His boyish face smiled at me and vanished into the dark with his retreat to his own room. I shrugged my shoulders. Well, let him intend! It was no time now to throw up the game when smiling fortune had just passed me the Joker.

I tore up the check and threw the scraps into the fire. I had always heard there was a place where good intentions were put to use.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FARM BECOMES ENGAGED

I didn't kiss my Manager again right away; in fact, he didn't ask me. He went on tending to business in a perfectly satisfactory way. I rather admired his skill in playing the fish he supposed he had hooked. And as for the ranch, I had to confess it would "be doing very well for itself" if he married it.

He was making quite a farmer of Paul, and he certainly knew how to handle men as well as horses and the internals of farm machinery. In truth, I felt myself a lucky person that he had decided to espouse my farm.

Things were going exceedingly well. His methods were not so much of the new school of farmers with new ideas, but savored strongly of the old time methods, that of keeping on the ground, and attending to the business of farming.

The spring, summer and fall went by just like the previous ones. There is so little variety in the service of the soil. Yet I suppose every bondsman tells the same story. We were all swamped with work, for it was a good crop

year. Yet I didn't mind for my part, about the work, because it made my ultimate freedom more certain.

Halleck Trent didn't say anything about his intentions during the summer or fall. I suppose he waited to see if the ranch would be in a position for espousal. But when winter came with its inactivity of rainy days and the intimacy of long winter evenings by the fire, I could see him growing restless and impatient. It was my turn to cultivate skill in dodging the final issue.

I held him off. This wooing of my ranch by proxy was an interesting game, and I wanted to be sure that my ranch had lure enough to hold as well as to win a husband. It wasn't dignified that it should be left, at a man's whim, a widow "gone to grass."

But the day came, a mild February afternoon late in the month, when I had to face the final moment.

I had gone down into the orchard to follow an ambitious turkey hen which was squawking about, preliminary to nest-building. There were no end of excellent places. So far as I could see, one place was as good as another, but Madam Bronze was very "choosy" about her prospective nest, and lingered hesitantly, speculating on this nook or that.

I dallied with her rather impatiently, for I had work to do in the house. In the meantime, I went over to the almond tree which was just beginning to hang out its fluted blossoms. I wanted some for the house, but they were all out of my reach. Just then Halleck Trent came by, his gun on his shoulder, Zed at his heels.

I called him and he came toward me. He certainly was a good looking chap, neat and trim in his blue flannel shirt, and his overalls tucked into the tops of his high laced shoes, his cap in his hand, for the February sun was delightfully warm and pleasant.

Always eager to help, he set his gun against a tree and gathered the blossoms for me. But when he turned to give them to me I saw by his face that a critical moment had arrived. Instead of relinquishing the flowers, he caught my hands back with them, and with an impetuous rush of words, he asked me to marry him. It was very neatly done; quite charmingly, in fact.

I looked up at him with eyes unblinded, and I had to admit that he was a graceful and convincing wooer. Almost I believed the truth of the tremor in his voice, when he told me with a splendid imitation of real passion that he loved me. I couldn't find any fault with his

outward appearance either. He was a little pale, his lips quivering slightly in his quite natural excitement.

I searched him with probing eyes, trying to break through that admirable front; but it bore the test very much as the real thing. After all, a man must have some ability to play the rôle of an imposter; and ability was what I wanted on my farm, so that it might be important as an Independent Principality.

In those few moments I realized wooing as an art of which undoubtedly, Halleck Trent possessed a natural gift. (I remembered Fanny.) Possibly much practice had rounded out and enriched his technique. My Manager, as I said, almost convinced me of the sincerity of his passion.

I didn't say anything, I just listened. I could see the interior of the bunk-house, the man asleep on the bed, and Bob's sulky face. And I heard again my Manager's voice:

"J'ai l'intention espouser la ferme."

I thought hard. I needed Halleck Trent. It would soon be haying time, with the attendant evils of men and machinery — and that mower was nearly worn out. This summer was my last chance. No — I couldn't let go now. If I refused him, in all decency he couldn't stay; and — if he was so bent on husbanding

my farm, it ill beseemed me to break up a good match! So when he pressed me for his answer, I gave him my promised word and yielded to his demand for a betrothal kiss.

I wasn't strong for lingering over lovers' rhapsodies, so Zed's warning bark was very welcome. Fortunately for me one of the men was coming up from the creek with his newly washed shirts and socks across his arm.

I stopped him and we had quite a lengthy discussion over one of the new calves. When he went on, I turned and said to my ardent lover, "Will you please take Zed away? I'm afraid he'll annoy my turkey hen."

He gave me a bewildered look, but he picked up his gun and whistled to Zed.

Why not? It wasn't I that he wanted to espouse.

After the preliminary hurdle was safely over, my Manager gave me a ring that he had brought from the battlefields of France; a black cameo with emerald eyes which he told me had been given him by a French officer whom he had found wounded, dying in a shell hole, and had eased his last moments.

This was, certainly, very interesting, and I hesitated, under the circumstances to accept so valuable a token. But I argued to myself that I probably wouldn't injure it by wearing it a

few months, so I expressed my admiration for it and paid him in the proper manner. We were engaged.

Naturally in the days that followed, he made several attempts to keep up the semblance of affection which he felt sure had won me; but I stopped that. It wasn't necessary; I had seen how well he could do it.

He seemed hurt on these occasions and, puzzled, looking at me queerly, took up his hat and left the house for hours. I suppose he was disappointed. He very likely expected to continue the practice of his art on me. But no matter what he expected. Let him go and caress the ranch!

He got over it. No man with any sense after arriving that far, is going to jeopardize a forty thousand dollar ranch for the sake of a little mush.

However, he apparently had no resentment toward me, or perhaps he was glad to be released from the duties of a lover. Anyway, he flung himself with all vigor into the service of the ranch. No doubt he looked on it as his own already; but that didn't disturb me. He would have plenty of time to find out his mistake.

CHAPTER XVIII

CELIA COMES BACK

The Hilyards had gone from San Francisco early in the winter, and had been visiting in the South and New York since. I hadn't heard from Celia for a long time, until one day in March I received a note from her saying that they were on their road back to their home in Los Angeles where they expected to spend the summer.

I wrote at once to her address there, but I didn't hear again. I spoke of it to Paul.

Paul said diffidently that she must be very busy as she hadn't written to him since Christmas. He didn't say any more, but I knew that he wrote to her again. He nearly always got the mail first, but I was sure that she didn't write, or he would have said so. I didn't understand it, and worried over it for his sake. I knew that Celia meant a very great deal to him.

A week later I saw in the County paper that the Hilyards had returned to their Stonehouse County ranch for a short stay, accompanied by Miss Hilyard's *fiancé*, Mr. Jerry Parker of St. Louis.

With a terrible sinking feeling, I laid the paper down. Of course Paul would see it — and I knew it would hurt. But when he did read it, he only said: “That’s why she didn’t write.”

That very day as I was dressing after dinner, I heard a horse galloping up the driveway. I peeked out; the rider was a woman. It couldn’t be anybody but Celia.

Flinging on my dress, I ran out to meet her. I was never so disappointed in my life as when I saw, not Celia, but Lucy Graham climbing down out of the saddle. She hadn’t been to the house for more than two years, and I had hardly seen her in that time.

She was still a pretty girl, though she had lost some of her girlishness, and had sort of a full-blown look, not unpleasing. I asked her in.

She came in ill at ease in her shabby blue denim riding habit and man’s hat pulled down over her dark hair. She made known her business at once as she seated herself. She wanted work. Did I need anyone to help in the kitchen?

I didn’t. “I am doing my own work,” I said. “Perhaps you might get some place in town. Very often I see notices in the papers for some one.”

Her face fell and I felt sorry for her, although

I would not have hired her because there had been talk of her. Mrs. Arpsbagger had winked and blinked in her old woman's way; but Mrs. Forest denied it. She said the girl was just unfortunately placed having no mother. There was no evil in her, she felt sure. It was just the custom of a small place to attack a girl's virtue.

I agreed with Mrs. Forest, for she had lived in the world and knew something of how to weigh values, but Mrs. Arpsbagger was just an old country woman who would call a girl immoral if the innocent thing was caught wearing her second cousin's Frat pin. That is, if she had known a Frat pin wasn't some kind of a squash bug!

She rose to go, but I asked her to stay a while. She hesitated, standing, so I took her out into the garden and visited with her. Our talk, however was strained, disjointed. It was with considerable relief I saw her mount her horse and ride away.

On Tuesday Paul was going into Ashby, so I said that I would go too.

"Go if you want to, Puss," he said wriggling into an old canvas coat; "but I'm going in the Ford and bring out a supply of grain."

"I don't mind that," I said cheerfully; "I'm not insensible these days to the charms of

the strictly utilitarian, and you're coming right back."

I put on my old hat and coat, for the sky looked stormy and the road had its usual share of spring mud, and climbed into the dingy, spattered old Ford.

We were soon there. Paul loaded in his grain and I purchased some groceries. We looked quite like the farming pair come into town with all our bundles and sacks of grain piled in the back of the car.

As we started to return home I said, "Oh, we forgot the meat, Paul. Run in and get it. And Paul," I called after him; "get a five-pound pail of lard."

"All right," he answered and disappeared inside the butcher shop.

I sat waiting. Directly he was gone, a big machine drew up to the curb and stopped beside me. I glanced around.

It was the Hilyards! Celia and her father, and a smart young man with the unmistakable urban stamp. They got out. Celia looked as lovely as ever and was beautifully dressed in a handsome gray coat and a hat that had surely come across the water. But her face was pale and thin.

I sat there, suddenly conscious of my sad garb, the Ford delivery and all the bundles and

piled up sacks in the back. None of the Hilyard party looked in my direction, and with intense relief I saw them step up on the curb. Then Celia turned half around and saw me.

She gave a little cry and came running back. I don't think she even saw the Ford and its preposterous load.

"Father! Here's Annette!" she called. "Oh, Jerry! Wait a minute."

Mr. Hilyard turned and saw everything that Celia had missed. With a reserved smile, he lifted his hat and went into the drug store. I hoped Jerry would follow his example; but naturally he couldn't. He came to Celia's side, and I had to submit to being introduced to Mr. Jerry Parker. He looked uninteresting, but his manners were irreproachable.

Celia chattered for a minute, fast. "Had I come in alone?"

"No. Paul is with me." I watched her face as I spoke, and I saw her shrink. "He just went into the meat shop; he'll be out in a minute," I added.

She glanced nervously toward the door, but made no move to go.

I arranged my conversation to give her a chance if she wanted to escape, but she didn't take advantage of it.

I wanted them to go. I didn't want Paul's

old coat and overalls and the bundle of steak to be contrasted with Mr. Parker.

"I wish Paul would hurry," I remarked; "it's nearly noon. I think I'll run in and tell him."

Her face changed; but I was bound to save Paul. I tried to open the car door, but it, of course, stuck like glue. Mr. Parker had a perfectly awful time with it; but it finally swung open, and I was just going to pop out and say charmingly, "Come over and see us, Celia," and fly into the meat shop, when Mr. Parker remarked in a pleasant drawl,

"There's a young man coming out now."

I settled back into that odious Ford. "Paul, Paul!" my sympathies shrieked out to him, for of course, it was Paul in his old coat and ranch shoes, with a warty bundle of meat in one hand and a bright looking pail of lard in the other.

"That gink — " began Paul. And then his eye fell on Celia, on Mr. Parker's comfortable elegance, and he stopped short.

Celia's face went white, but she smiled beautifully.

Paul shifted his meat bundle and jerked off his hat, and Mr. Parker lifted his. I could have screamed in my chagrin.

Paul went to the opposite side of the car and

stowed his supplies, then he came around and took the hand Celia held out.

I don't know what he said to her, or to Mr. Parker, for instantly to my mind flashed the long forgotten picture of Mama and Papa with the chicken feed, the coop and the oozy oil can at the station along the route.

I remembered that I heard Celia's pretty laugh and again Mr. Parker's pleasant drawl, and saw admiration in his eyes when I spoke, though I don't know what I said. I only knew that Paul acquitted himself with a grace and charm not usually clad in bib overalls, and I was glad that he had come out in time to defend his own position.

At last it all stopped. They turned away, and as the Ford backed out with its rickety commotion, I waved my hand to Celia. But I couldn't see anything at all except the cords of Paul's white knuckles on the wheel.

Thank God! There was but a few months longer of such life.

CHAPTER XIX

"ANNETTE, I'VE BEEN WAITING"

We didn't see anything more of the Hilyard party. Celia didn't come over, but after she went away I had a long letter from her. In it she told me the date of her wedding. It was the strangest letter I ever read from a soon-to-be bride. I couldn't put my finger on any one thing, but the whole spirit of the letter breathed unhappiness.

Perhaps I was disloyal but, feeling that I should probably never see Celia again, and not being able to make anything out of it, I showed the letter to Halleck. I wondered if his simplicity could find the meaning where my sophistication failed.

He read it through and handed it back. "What's she marrying that fellow for?" he asked.

"Because she wants to, I suppose."

"It doesn't sound like it," he said briefly.

"Does it?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Is that what you make out of it?"

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I wouldn't want

anybody to feel like that if she was going to marry me."

I wondered if he were right; if Celia was unhappy, and if it would be wise or not, to show the letter to Paul. I decided to do so.

Like Halleck, he read it through and gave it back to me, but his face was white. Without a word he went out. I knew then that I had made a mistake, for he did not return that night. I sat up all night waiting for him but he didn't come back until the next afternoon. And I couldn't bear then to look into his eyes.

Life wasn't easy for any of us in the days that followed, for night after night Paul went out and I never knew when he would return; but I suspected where he went.

Once I attempted to remonstrate with him.

"Oh damn it, Annette!" He got up knocking the chair over in his violence, and left the house, not returning until midnight.

I know that Paul was insane that spring. Nothing else could have influenced him to throw himself away as he did, to leave me alone day after day and far into the nights, at the ranch with the hired men, or perhaps only Halleck Trent, with no protection from the tongues of the country gossips.

I did not hear much that was said, but I

knew his actions robbed him of the respect of the men who worked for us, and I came in for pity and graver criticism. Halleck tried to talk to him I knew, but it was useless. I kept silent, thinking that perhaps his obsession for Lucy Graham would wear itself out, and he would come back to his right mind. At any rate it was only a few months until we should be free. I counted the days as I counted expenses, until the time would be up. How gladly I would shake myself free from this life and rescue Paul, no one could know save myself who had borne the brunt for five years.

During this time I discovered a new depth in my Manager, for undoubtedly he understood and appreciated the position I was in, and rose to it with the consideration that marks a man. It heightened my respect for him, and my liking.

I did like Halleck Trent, and the only time he displeased me was on his occasional attempts to remind me of our relations toward each other. Sometimes I wondered what was his real attitude on this travesty of an engagement between us.

One evening we were having supper alone. There were no men and Paul was gone as usual. I had learned not to wait for Paul.

We had rather a silent meal, for Halleck's

face was unusually serious, and I was thinking of Paul. When I got up to clear the table, Halleck offered to wipe the dishes.

"Then you'll be through for the night," he said.

There weren't many dishes, so we got through in a few minutes, washed our hands together in the basin and dried them on the roller towel.

"The moon's A-1 tonight," said Halleck. "We've neglected her so long we ought to be ashamed to look her in the face. Come out and apologize to her."

He took my arm companionably and led me out into the yard. The moon, almost full, made a great circle of light like an increasing fire, and peering through the oaks made mystic shadows across the brick walk.

"It does seem a shame to neglect her, she is so beautiful," I said; "but in this mad rush of the simple life, I almost forget there is a moon."

I caught myself. I could see by his face that the moon was a dangerous topic for him tonight. As a preventive I began to talk about how the feed was coming on in the cow pasture.

Halleck was not enthusiastic, I noted. But he took the cue politely, and while he gave me a detailed account of the herbage and its re-

actionary effect on the herd, we wandered about the garden, arm in arm through the most enchanting moonlight and scented dusk.

Continuing, just as if I expected to go on with this farming life forever, we disked the north pasture and plowed and re-seeded the east half of the south field. We decided to try Australian Rye in the low, wet end of the west lot. We beefed Madge and Spot, who were rather erratic milkers, but agreed to give old Mattie another year because she had already produced three fine heifers that were coming into milk bountifully.

We changed the irrigation flume across the creek, and put new stanchions in one of the cow barns, and computed just about how much hay the first crop of alfalfa should yield. I said,

"The small milk bucket has sprung a leak; we must charge our minds to get a new one."

Halleck released my arm, reached into his pocket for note book and pencil and jotted down this important item.

I turned around. "Let's go in," I suggested.

"What's the hurry? We came out to pay our respects to the moon, and I believe she hasn't even found out we're here yet."

"I have some letters to write; the moon can wait."

“ Maybe she’s tired of waiting, Annette.”
An odd note rang in his voice.

I didn’t answer. A thin, cool wind came up swaying the iris blooms until their fragrance weighted the night air. Two white winged moths flew round and round our heads, and a bird woke and began to sing sleepily.

The moon, high up above the tree tops kept right on showering down her flood of golden light, wrapping the garden in a mellow charm. Quivering leaves on the low shrubs caught and held the light on their glossy surface, but under the branches lay the soft velvet mystery of dark.

The beauty and magic of the common night silenced me, stilled my chatter of pastures and leaky milk pails. I remained silent looking out across the adjacent field to the dim outline of the distant mountains.

Halleck took my arm again. Though we stood there together, there was no harmony of mind between us.

How still the night grew! How far we were — how far from the life of the world! It was hard to realize as we stood there as much alone as the first man and the first woman in the first garden, that elsewhere, all over the world there was noise and glare; the swift turn of wheels, laughter, music, voices, the passing of eager

feet; the kaleidoscopic panorama of the civic centers.

I lifted my eyes to the stars, dimly showing, and felt the moonlight flood my face. I heard Halleck's quick, indrawn breath, his low voice,

"Annette, I've been waiting quite a while."

"For what?" I asked, my voice as cold as I felt.

"For you to show that you loved me even a little." His voice betrayed the controlled undercurrent.

I felt hostile as on that first night at the window. "Does it make any difference to you?"

"Any difference! What are you thinking about?" He caught me in his arms.

I knew what was coming. I ducked suddenly and shrank away from him. His intended kiss landed on top of my head.

I didn't want to be kissed. I started for the house.

He drew me back. "Kiss me, Annette."

I didn't want to. I simply didn't want to! Yet there was something awfully attractive and persuasive about Halleck as I looked up into his boyish face. Oh, well. I suppose it wouldn't kill me. Unwillingly my lips approached and brushed his in passing.

His arms tightened around me. "Kiss me!" It was a man's peremptory demand.

Wild thoughts of rebellion wheeled through my mind. I dismissed them, for his arms held me tightly and his eyes compelled me. I looked him full in the face. Yes, I could do it if I must, but not willingly. His real *fiancée*, the ranch gave grudgingly, made one pay — suffer — for any favor, so would I. I deliberately stepped up on his foot, making the most of my hundred and twenty pounds.

The moonlight showed me the shock and surprise of his face — the reflex of physical pain. His laugh followed. Catching me up in his arms, he lifted me and held me, looking down into my face with a curious expression in his clear eyes.

"Hop on the other foot, linnet, butterfly, gnat! You can't hurt me."

"Put me down, Halleck!" I commanded angrily. But he laughed again and took the favor which I had haggled over in the giving.

"Annette, you're the strangest girl I ever knew, but you're beautiful. I love you, and you are mine!"

His voice of passionate energy filled me with something like alarm. I understood for the first time that I was dealing with a man.

"Put me down!" I said fiercely.

He gently set me on my feet.

I flounced toward the house, realizing even in my hot anger, that there were some glaring flaws in my perfectly good plan of retaining a competent manager.

Neither of us spoke. He kept his arm around me as we went back over the path. I wanted to fling it off, but I feared the consequences of trying. Instead I sulked, and walked along stiff as a ramrod and belligerent as a two-year-old calf at the end of its first rope.

At the door he released me silently. He must have known that I was angry, but to make sure he did know, I turned to glare at him, intending to wither him with my concentrated glance of scorn.

He met my blighting look with a disarming smile, his eyes full of affection.

My anger began to dissolve. If he played his part so well, why should I be so churlish as not to play mine? What legitimate reason had I to be angry, anyway? This game was of my own planning. I had gone into it with my eyes wide open; then why should I sulk that Halleck Trent had swept in a trick? Was it wise or kind to let the moon go down upon my wrath?

Deciding it was not, I bent toward him and kissed him of my own will, and I saw his eyes

shine. Instantly I regretted it, yet for hours after, I heard his happy voice.

“ Good night, Annette. Sleep tight.”

I heard it for hours as I lay awake listening for the sound of the car which would bring Paul home. Through the long moonlit hours, for the golden glow poured into the room bright as an arc light, my mind ran over the past five years, barring the few months yet to come before Paul and I should be free. They had been long hard years, but the end was already in sight.

That I should have my ranch I felt almost sure, and then Paul would come away with me and forget his idiotic infatuation for Lucy Graham and his heart-break over Celia.

And how would Halleck Trent take the outcome of his plans? I flopped impatiently under my covers. Tonight's incident I would not even consider. He had done and was still doing all that was possible to further my interests, his own as well perhaps, yet no matter how willing a man may be to take a risk, the ultimate failure is very likely to sweep him off his foundations. He was more of a man than I had, at first, given him credit for. The test of these last months had proved that. What would happen when the game was played out and I held all the cards?

This question returned to me again and again, and no answer presented itself. I could not even close my eyes until I heard the car door slam at the gate, and knew that Paul had come.

CHAPTER XX

AN OLD HAND COMES BACK AND ZED GOES A-HUNTING

Anxious for the time to pass, I hailed the first hay cutting with joy. It seemed a milestone reached on the last lap of the journey.

Halleck went to Ashby after men, and when he returned with four, he told me that one said he had worked for me before.

I wasn't particularly interested, but I asked the name which Halleck had forgotten. Yet when the men came in to supper, I looked for a familiar face and recognized Dick Patton.

He was watching me out of his bold blue eyes, and expected some sort of a greeting.

I shook hands with him as is courteous to a former employee, and I could see that he was glad to be back.

It didn't take a very clever observer to note that he had changed considerably, for the worse, in his four years' absence. Men of the road live fast. He was older, heavier of body and coarser faced, with a sneer in his eyes and on his sensuous mouth that marred what was left of his good looks.

I didn't like the way he appraised me that evening, nor the easy familiarity with which he tried to pick up the friendly footing that had marked his former stay.

I returned his significant gaze coldly. It annoyed me decidedly, and I wanted him to understand I had no tender thoughts twining around our former intercourse.

He understood quickly and applied himself to his supper and to the task of trying to find out Halleck's relation to the ranch.

In the morning, Halleck put him on one of the mowers. He managed to get in before the other men at noon and came to the well for a drink.

I was there peeling apples with that same knife. He recognized it, and had the impudence to ask me how many men's eyes I had put out since he left.

I answered coldly, "As many as before you went away," and taking up my pan, went into the house.

He laughed, and said after me, "You're going to pay for the eye, yet, you know."

I paid no attention to him. What he said didn't concern me except that it annoyed me, as I soon saw was his design. He had a way of watching me until unconsciously, I gave him my attention, then he would look from me to

Halleck meaningly, or questioningly, or with ill-concealed amusement. Or he would glance suddenly at me, and by some strange suggestive process, not by any visible means, bring to my mind that he expected me to pay a debt I owed him.

He annoyed Halleck in countless ways, more direct, and made trouble among the men; trying to stir up something all the time. It was a clear case of suggested mutiny, for one could not point to any specific thing.

Halleck grew impatient under it. Sometimes I used to see him walk away from Patton in an exasperated manner, yet I was sure there were no words between them.

I stood him for a week and felt worn out. His very presence on the ranch worked on my nerves, and the meaning smile in his dissipated eyes was as annoying as a long, sharp tack in one's shoe.

"Get rid of him, Halleck," I said. "He is trying to make trouble."

Halleck answered, "He'll be through mowing Saturday, and I'll let him go. He makes me so confounded mad I can't hardly keep from swatting him. If he annoys me any more, I'm very liable to knock him loose from his hat."

On Friday night there was a special show in Ashby to which all the men decided to go. I

confess that I was impatient for them to get away. They all piled into the Ford and I heard the last snort of the engine with pure joy. My flagged spirits rose like an apple in the water. No matter how hard Pippin falls or how far he sinks, as soon as he gets his bearings he rises to the surface and rides gayly on top. So my spirits which had been low for weeks, rose and sailed around in exhilarated isolation.

Having a bunch of men around all the time is about the most wearing thing imaginable. It's like swarms of flies, or north wind, or the incessant meowing of a cat; so when Halleck asked me if I minded staying alone or if I was afraid, I didn't tell him that I was overjoyed to be alone, but I did say I never thought of being afraid; there wasn't any possible danger in the country.

The evening being mild and warm I sat out on the steps in glorious solitude watching the last of the light die in the west. The mosquitoes grew too friendly so I got up and went into my own room.

I had forgotten to fill the lamp that morning. In all my five years I had never become used to the terrific amount of pampering a kerosene lamp demands before it will condescend to cast out its feeble ray.

I went and filled it, wiped the smoky chimney

and washed the soot from my hands. Having lit my lamp like a wise virgin I was forced to pull down the blind to shut out the myriads of tiny winged insects that swarmed through the screen.

I pulled off my shoes and stockings to bathe my feet and legs. They still burned from the jabbings the stickers in the chicken yard had given me as I ran Madam Plymouth Rock and her distracted family round and round the coop to get them inside.

I had to get them in because there was a skunk marauding about, which had caught dozens of chickens. We had tried every way to catch it, but had failed. Hateful thing! I was just about sick over the number of chickens it had killed.

Putting on a fresh pair of shoes and stockings, I composed myself for a serene evening. I wrote a letter to Dustan, and read an article in a Farm Magazine about the healthy, happy, care-free existence on the farm, far from the dusty, noisy, sin stained city.

Zed began to bark excitedly so I got up and went out to see if the barn was on fire. I saw with relief that it looked all right, but I didn't go back to the house. Zed was tearing around barking furiously so I helped him hunt for the skunk, but we didn't find it.

It was really a wonderful May night. The moon wasn't too bright to hide all the stars, and a south wind, hinting of rain, blew briskly enough to keep the trees waving their dark foliage against the sky.

The water in the creek sounded so loud, innumerable insects chirped and frogs croaked.

Zed ran around in a wide circle and came wriggling back to me and stuck his nose against my knee. He missed the men, I supposed. Dogs hate to have the people go away.

We sat down on the step and visited together. Several cars sounded on the road below but they didn't come up our way.

The clock struck ten so I said "Good night, Zed," and went to my room.

Zed followed me to the door which opened directly on the porch, begging me not to go in, but when I did, he went off to look after his skunk.

The bed looked awfully inviting. I flopped down on it for a minute.

I must have fallen asleep instantly, and slept for—I don't know how long. Something awaked me. I rolled over sleepily. The light still burned feeble and yellow in the room.

I started to sit up, and then I sprang to my feet. Dick Patton stood in the middle of the room.

My first thought was that something had happened, an accident.

"Paul!" I said. (I always thought of Paul.) What's the matter? Is he hurt?"

Dick Patton shook his head slowly, looking at me with an unpleasant smile. "Don't pretend you don't know me, as you've been doing for several days. Paul isn't here, nor *Mr.* Trent, nor any of the rest; just you and I, alone. I thought this would be a good time for us to get acquainted."

I just stared at him stupidly.

"I happened to find out that your *Manager* intends to let me out tomorrow night, so I want to collect on what you've owed me for four years."

My brain blew clear. "You must be crazy!" I said.

He smiled a slow, ugly smile. "Nevertheless you're going to pay me for that eye."

"Please don't begin on that again, I beg of you."

"Please, pretty please!" He grinned hatefully and came toward me and put out his hand. "The poor man with only one eye! Are you going to pay me, Annette?"

"I am not," I said flatly. I stepped back looking straight at him; "And if you touch me, I'll put out every eye you have left."

He laughed, vastly amused, and kept advancing, with the laugh simmering down to a wicked leer.

"No, you won't; because you're afraid of me."

"I am not," I said coolly. But I kept retreating; I had to. "Why should I be afraid of you? I presume you're civilized."

"No matter. You *are* afraid of me."

"I am annoyed at your being here, but I am not afraid of you," I repeated.

"Why?" There was just a shade of doubt in his former assured tone, that did not escape me.

"Because you have nothing to gain by harming me, and much to lose. And you have too much sense not to see the wisdom of that."

He just looked at me from under his eyelids and kept coming towards me.

I had to keep moving, but I wasn't afraid, because I knew that he had been decently raised and I knew too, that he recognized me as a woman of the class to which he had originally belonged. I felt that he had no wish to harm me, only to annoy me, and convince me of his power to harm.

"You're figuring on the appeal your beauty and defenseless condition makes, I suppose," he sneered.

"Not exactly," I answered quietly; "I am depending on your common sense."

"Figure again, beautiful Annette. I haven't had any sense since I met you." He fixed his eyes on me in the way a cat looks at a bird before it jumps on it, and kept coming towards me.

I had to retreat, and we went this way twice around the room.

It was nerve racking. I couldn't stand the silence.

"We're being ridiculous!" I said.

"*You* couldn't be," he retorted mockingly.

I resisted my desire to slap his insolent face wondering how long I could keep up my calm front. Surely the men would come soon. I wanted to dash out at the screen door, but I couldn't see that I would be any better off outside. And that would only precipitate matters, whatever he had in his mind. I strained my ears for the welcome clickity-clack of the Ford.

"It would please me very much better," I remarked; "if you would go away. This isn't particularly entertaining to me."

He stuck his grinning face close to mine. "I haven't begun to be entertaining yet."

There was something decisive in the ugly look he gave me. A cold chill ran up my spine,

and I couldn't think quickly of what to say next. I didn't take my eyes off of him, but I strained my ears again for the Ford. I could only hear Zed running and barking, and feel the jar of the floor as he leaped on the porch and came tearing past the door in the full swing of the pursuer, giving frantic tongue as he sped after his prey.

"Oh!" I screamed. "There's the *skunk!*" Zed's found it! Catch it! Catch it! Sic' 'im, Zed! *Get it!*"

Dominantly waving Dick Patton out of my path, I plunged out through the screen door after Zed, clapping my hands and shrieking maniacal encouragement.

At the corner Zed nabbed his fleeing game, and a pungent odor filled the air. Zed worried and shook his prey, stopping at intervals to roll his face in the grass, while I danced around and screamed at him, "Kill it! Kill it!" Zed responded to my cries and his own instinct, until the varmint lay inert, and he went to roll, and roll, and bury his outraged nose in the dirt.

Then I remembered Dick Patton. I swung around from the evil smelling corpse, to find him beside me.

"Wasn't that *lucky!*" I exulted; "that Zed got it? He's been looking for it all evening.

It's killed more than fifty chickens — " I paused suddenly conscious in my excitement how awfully funny Dick Patton looked — like the tag end of something.

He laughed shortly, eyeing me in a sort of grim speculation.

Zed came back again and grabbed his foe to see if it were truly dead, and I heard the long drawn, wheezy cry of the Ford horn. Halleck always blew it to let me know that he was coming.

" There are the boys," I remarked in a relief I carefully kept out of my voice. Patton wheeled curtly. " You win!" he said, and stalked around the house and disappeared; while I hugged Zed, odor and all, and laughed and laughed. When the boys arrived, the house was dark and still, and I was cuddled in my bed.

CHAPTER XXI

HALLECK GAVE DICK PATTON HIS LESSON

Dick Patton looked both foolish and sullen when we met next morning, and I nearly laughed in his face when I remembered the absurd ending to his disgusting heroics. The boys asked him when and how he got home. He told a very creditable lie, at least he lied about the time he came. His face turned quite red when I graphically described, at the breakfast table, Zed's remarkable achievement in the night. He didn't say anything about his having been an eye witness, and neither did I.

After breakfast he came out to the milk house where I was washing the separator. I glanced up as the door darkened.

He looked positively silly, but he said he hoped I'd overlook his mistake of the night. He'd had a couple of shots of bootleg and it went to his head.

I knew perfectly well that he was lying; there wasn't anything dazed about his actions. I told him I wasn't letting it trouble me in the least.

He tried to smile. "You don't need to be

afraid of me, Miss Torrel. I wouldn't hurt you."

"I'm sure I never thought of being afraid of you." I said coldly; "but sometimes perfectly harmless animals can make themselves very unpleasant."

He was furious I could see, as he banged the door and went out. But I didn't care at all how he took it. I went on scrubbing separator parts. Presently I heard the hum of the mower.

I listened thankfully. If everything went all right he'd finish by night; and he'd certainly not work for me again!

It began to get warm and about ten o'clock the north wind came up. By noon it was blowing a gale that undoubtedly would have scored a rise out of Griselda. Its scorching heat made the plants all wilt dejectedly, and set my head to aching. Matters weren't improved when I saw Patton bring the mower in to the shop at noon.

That meant delay. I heard him tell Halleck that the sickle guard was loose; nothing serious but it needed to be fixed.

Everybody was off key at dinner, a tribute to the wind, and Patton was as grouchy as could be. He never looked at me, and I paid him the same compliment.

Halleck kept looking at me during the meal. I think he knew something had disturbed me, but I didn't say anything to him, or Paul either, about Patton. There's never any use in getting men started.

After dinner they all went outside to smoke and talk under the big tree in front of the shop. Paul went with them, but Halleck stayed a few minutes to ask me if I felt badly.

"No," I said; "just a trifle upset, the wind is so disagreeable."

"It is bad," he said. "Perhaps it won't blow tomorrow." He turned away to join the men.

They all lay stretched on the ground, in various attitudes, except Paul and Patton who stood near the mower talking. Patton was rolling a cigarette.

As Halleck left me I went to the window where I could watch them unobserved, for I was working up another series of drawings.

I watched Halleck's alert, soldierly figure as he approached Patton.

Paul moved on a few feet. I was just thinking what a good composition group, when Patton gave Halleck a sneering look and said something.

I saw Paul turn abruptly, but quick as the dart of a snake, Halleck's right fist caught

Patton in the face and he crashed over. His head struck against the corrugated iron wheel of the mower with a sickening smash, and he slithered to the ground in a limp heap.

Paul leaped to him, and the men all sprang up. Halleck's white, shocked face turned toward the house for an instant.

I ran out. Patton lay pale and twitching, his mouth opening and shutting like a dying fish. I heard one of the men say,

"By God! You've done for him!"

"Paul! Halleck!" I cried.

"Go into the house, Annette," commanded Halleck, and I obeyed.

But I saw him kneel, tear open Patton's shirt and feel his heart. He lifted the limp head, and the blood ran down on his hands.

"For Christ's sake! Let's get him to a doctor!"

Paul started for the garage, but it was Halleck who outstripped him, and brought the car out with a rush. It was he who showed them how to make an ambulance bed in the back, and helped lift Patton in. He made one of the men get in beside Patton's inert body.

He waved Paul aside and got in behind the wheel, and jerked open the other door for Paul.

"Come with me," he said, and threw in the clutch. "Look out for your hat."

The driveway gate was standing ajar and he crashed right through, never pausing. The splintered boards flew, while I stood on the house porch wringing my hands and demanding of God to give Halleck time.

I heard the car thunder across the loose boards of the little bridge by Cattman's, and then Mrs. Cattman's ring — I always knew it — calling up to ask what was wrong. Nothing escaped Mrs. Cattman.

I told her that one of the men had got hurt on the mower. Of course she thought he was all cut to pieces, and I let her think so. I hung up and left her talking and went outside.

Gene, the old man had come to the well. I asked how it happened. It was all so quick and terrible!

He didn't know any more than I did, possibly not as much, for I had seen Halleck look toward the house and I felt the offense, whatever it was, concerned me.

The other two men came up and we talked the matter over. We were all mystified. I was the only one who had seen it, and the men declared Halleck had not said a word of explanation. I knew he hadn't, for I had heard his every word.

Finally they all went off to work and I went in to wash the dishes. I don't know how I got

through the intervening hours until Paul's return, for I kept hearing over and over again old Gene's "By God! You've done for him!" I knew that Halleck thought so too. I listened for the telephone message, but nothing came except calls from the neighbors who had heard about the accident by listening in.

Toward evening Paul came, he and the man, Gus. Paul made haste to tell me that Patton was still alive, but he had concussion of the brain.

They had taken him first to the doctor in Ashby, but at his advice, had rushed him on to the hospital in Redlands. And afterward Halleck had given himself up.

I felt something terrible clutch me inside.

"What will they do with him, Paul?"

"Well, of course — if Patton dies, it's — manslaughter."

"Is — is he in — prison?" I faltered.

"No, no." assured Paul. "He had to give bond, of course. I went his bond. He'll be back tomorrow. It's hard luck!"

Paul walked back and forth across the dining room floor.

"Halleck was in the right. If ever a man needed a wallop, Patton did. I was starting for him when Halleck beat me to it. It was just hard luck that his head hit that wheel."

I dared not ask Patton's offense; but Paul stopped his pacing for a moment. "Did Patton ever annoy you in any way, Annette?"

I told him of the two instances. "Don't tell Halleck," I urged.

Paul ground his teeth with an oath. "It won't be necessary if Patton lives, but if it comes to a trial, these things will help Halleck."

"Paul!" The horror of my own situation dawned on me as I sat there looking at Paul. Not but what I was willing and glad to help Halleck, but to stand in the witness dock with eyes, and eyes, and more eyes on me, — eager ears and busy tongues! And the newspapers!

This terrible life! Where else could a woman like me have become embroiled in such a vulgar predicament save here on the land, where primitive conditions brought out by force of like attraction, primitive emotions in men?

Then, too, I was not insensible to Halleck's position. I recalled his piteous, shocked face at that moment when he had realized what had happened. So I knew whichever way things turned, though I might shrink in a cowardly way, I would be hard put to find a way out. There was no way. I should have to stand by him until it was all settled. I was caught in a web of my own weaving, and it was liable to tangle me up into a very humiliating situation.

I brought my mind back to the present difficulty.

“ Is there *anything* we can do to help, Paul? ”

Paul shook his head. “ It all depends simply on whether he lives or dies. And Puss, the devil of it is — they found an identification card on him, and he belongs to that Pahtune family in San Francisco. You know, Serena’s friends. Do you remember during the war, the fight over Richard Pahtune’s exemption; how they moved heaven and earth and got him exempted? Well — he’s Richard Pahtune, old Rodney Pahtune’s son; Geraldine’s brother. Can you beat that! ”

CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH DICK PATTON DOESN'T DIE

Halleck came home the following day, which was Sunday, before supper. He came in looking terribly white and disheartened, and so piteous! To my mute look of inquiry he said:

"He is still alive; just alive. They have sent for his people."

He sat down wearily and leaned his head against the high back of the chair.

I went to him, and put my hand on his forehead, stroking back his hair.

Reaching up, he took my hand and pressed my wrist against his face. It was a sort of pitiful, childish gesture.

Paul came in and I went out to get supper.

Halleck refused supper and went to his room, but I followed him with a cup of hot coffee. He took it from me at the door and tried to drink it, to please me. He handed back the cup, half full and said, "I'll do better in the morning." But Paul, whose room was next to his, said he walked the floor all night.

He sat down to the table in the morning and

took some food on his plate, but he ate very little of it. After breakfast he went out into the field with the men.

As soon as I could get the hospital, I called up and asked about Patton.

The attendant said there was no perceptible change; he was still alive.

The men were getting in the hay and Halleck worked with them, coming in at night so wretched looking, that I begged him to take a little rest.

"Oh, God! I can't rest." He went outside. About midnight I heard him come in.

The third night I was on the point of sending for the doctor, he looked so worn and exhausted. Paul said roughly, for men always have to be hard with each other if they're sorry:

"If you don't pull up, Hal, you'll beat Patton to it."

Halleck laughed wretchedly and went into his room. He wouldn't hear of my sending for the doctor.

I called up the hospital again. Patton was still holding on. This seemed like hope to me.

The day had been terribly warm for May. After I finished my work, I went to Halleck's door. I could hear his halting steps as he paced around the room like a sick horse that is

afraid to lie down for fear it can't get up again.

I knocked gently and said, "Halleck, open the door."

He paid no attention so I turned the knob and looked in.

He turned around. "Is that you, Annette? What do you want?"

"I want to do something for you. Why don't you leave your door open? It's terribly hot in here."

I opened the windows and let in the cooler air of the evening. I insisted that he change his clothes which were wet with perspiration, while I went after a basin of water.

When I returned, he stood in the open door in clean, dry clothes fumbling with the buttons of his cuffs.

I took hold of his arm and led him outside. Making him lie down on the porch couch, I washed his face and hands in cool water and combed his hair smooth.

He lay quiet under my hands while I fussed over him. The lines on his face softened, making him look awfully childish and dependent. Once his fingers closed round mine as a baby's do, and often he opened his tired eyes and fixed them on my face. It was hard to believe, looking at him then, that he was a man who had taken a man's part in the world.

I thought he went to sleep for a few minutes, but soon he opened his eyes and said:

"I feel better. You're a good doctor, Annette."

"Shut your eyes then, and sleep."

Instead of closing his eyes, he searched my face, saying huskily:

"Annette, if — if things go — wrong, I'll not hold you."

I hoped he couldn't see the hot flush that burned my face in the dusk.

"Don't think about that now," I said gently. "I'm sure everything will be all right. They must be," I added fiercely.

"Anyway my head doesn't ache as it did. Thank you. You'd better go to bed. It's getting cold."

The night air was growing chill as May nights at the ranch were apt to be. I got up and went after a blanket. This I spread over him, bade him good night and went to my own room.

In the morning Paul said that Halleck moved into his room in the night. He must have slept for it was past noon when he came out looking more like himself. He ate something. This, with his long sleep did him a lot of good. In the cool of the evening he and Paul and I, drove to Redlands to see about Patton.

It was an evening very much like the one which had so charmed us the first day we came to the ranch, though it was earlier in the year. The air was fresh and cool; there were wonderful reflections in the river, and magnificent colors in the clouds in the west.

We were almost cheerful on the road, but fell silent the nearer we approached Redlands and what might be there waiting for us.

We stopped in front of the hospital. It was neat and white with a pretty grass plot and flowers around it. I got out and went in because I was sure no one there knew me.

The plump Matron came to the door. At my inquiry she said:

"He regained consciousness at noon. The doctors feel reasonably sure the danger is over. The father and sister are with him at present. Do you wish to come in?"

"No, thank you," I said. "Perhaps I'll call again." I hastened out to tell Paul and Halleck the good news.

The blood rushed over Halleck's pale face. He lifted his head and squared his shoulders, yet his eyes that looked into mine still held the pain of uncertainty.

"Oh, thank the Lord, Sis!" said Paul in intense relief. "He ought to die, confound him!"

But of course, under the circumstances, we don't want him to."

"Oh, God, Paul!" Halleck burst out; "let him get well if he can."

"He's going to, I'm sure," I said with conviction. "Oh Paul — Oh Halleck — I'm so glad!" I broke down and cried as I got back into the car. I felt so happy for us all.

We were quiet but cheerful on the way home. And when I got out of the car at our own door, keenly conscious of the great load lifted off us all, I turned back and kissed both Paul and Halleck good night.

CHAPTER XXIII

FRANCIS BOALT MUST GO TO CHICAGO

The whole affair which promised to be so terrible, turned out very well. The reunited Pahtune family left the hospital a week later and returned to the city.

A letter from Serena informed me that Geraldine's brother Richard had just come home from a long trip through South America. Among other adventures he had had a thrilling experience with a gang of Bandits on the Border. She said he was an awfully interesting man, and his account of the fight with the Outlaws was *hair-raising*. He was quite severely wounded and expected to remain at home until he recovered.

I didn't enlighten Serena. She was perfectly capable of looking out for herself, and besides maybe she'd take Dick Patton on and reform him!

It took some time for Halleck to recover himself; he was very grave and quiet for weeks after. But the incident had a splendid effect on Paul. Being thoroughly frightened at the

possibility of a catastrophe to me, he stayed at home and attended to his share of the ranch business. I was so happy over this, that I was glad the affair had occurred.

Since we had set the fashion, things began to happen at all the ranches in the neighborhood.

The worst thing was that poor old Mrs. Arpsbagger, while chasing a hen, fell down and broke her arm, and had to go to the hospital for a week.

It was most unfortunate, and I felt sorry for Mr. Arpsbagger too. No danger of farmers sending their wives away for their own comfort. They are the most forlorn creatures imaginable when their women folk are gone.

We went over one evening, and I took him a pie. It seemed to please him so much that we stayed and visited a while.

He took us out to see his chickens, dozens of lovely young fryers and well bred biddies. He offered me a setting of White Wyandotte eggs, which was very nice of him, for his chickens were prize winners at the County Fair.

Little Mrs. Keene presented her husband with twins, in addition to the three children already in the family. I was rather amazed when I heard it, because I had seen her out helping Mr. Keene hoe corn not very many months before.

The Forests sent their eldest boy to the Davis, the State Agricultural College, in northern California and Lucy Graham got a position in a restaurant in Redlands. I was glad to hear this, because the poor girl evidently wanted to get something to do very much.

Paul saw Mr. Carmichael in town one day. He had just imported a partner, a young Irishman with a rare brogue. Mr. Carmichael asked Paul if he might bring the Import over some time.

I hadn't seen the Earl's son, since the night he had told me about his new ranch, so when he came over one evening bringing Terence O'Malley, I was pleased to see him. He had apparently recovered from any wound he might have sustained, and was still argumentative over forage crops and legumes.

We had a very pleasant evening. Mr. O'Malley was new and amusing as could be. He told me that he expected his sister out in the spring, so I felt confident that Mr. Carmichael's future was assured.

Francis Boalt, too, had his share in the Passing Show, for events required that he present himself in Chicago on the occasion of Timothy Boalt's wedding.

Paul, Halleck and I went over to see Mr. Boalt before his going.

Tim's move had hit him awfully hard. He looked thin, and his gray mustache drooped disconsolately as he urbanely shook hands all around and invited us to seats.

Mary wasn't quite through with her supper dishes, so I went in to visit her.

She bubbled over with excitement. Tim was marrying a rich society girl whose father had made a million in pork.

"But Mr. Boalt is *terrible* disappointed," said Mary. "He don't even want to go back to the wedding; but he's going."

"What are you going to do while he is gone?" I asked. "You'd better come and stay with me."

"Oh, but I'm going too," Mary announced with pride. "Tim sent me — I must show you —" Mary jerked her hands out of the dish water and wiped them carefully on her apron. She trotted to the cupboard where she evidently kept her treasure for ready and frequent reference.

With careful hand she brought out a thick white envelope addressed to Mrs. Mary Marks. From this she extracted Timothy Boalt's engraved wedding invitation, and loftily held it out to me.

"Oh, Mary! That's beautiful!" I exclaimed.

"Ain't it swell!" said Mary beaming.

I admired it duly. "So you're going too, Mary?"

She ducked her fat chin. "You see, Tim wants his father to come back there and go into the law business again."

"Will he do it?"

She shook her head as she returned the wedding invitation to the cupboard shelf. "I don't know, Miss Torrel. He's all broke up. You'd better go in there and talk to him."

I went into the sitting room. Evidently the conversation wasn't going very briskly. Paul and Halleck turned over the leaves of a Snapshot album together, and Francis Boalt, apart, sat with his finger tips fitted together, apparently in deep thought.

The boys looked up in relief at my entrance, and almost directly Francis Boalt spoke of his son's approaching marriage.

"I regret it very much," he said.

"Mary says that he is getting into very advantageous connections," I reminded him.

"From the average worldly standpoint, yes," he acquiesced; "but to me it means that Timothy will never return to the land."

"Perhaps," I consoled; "even if he does not; his son may. These things often go in cycles."

"I haven't time to wait for Timothy's son.

And granting that that should happen, the land will be alien to him. It will have missed one generation."

He sat silent for a while. I couldn't think of any answer to this, and the boys returned to their album.

He continued. "It is a great struggle; this pitting one's self against the land. But we grow old and tired. The land never grows tired —"

"It gives the other fellow the back ache," interjected Paul flippantly, looking up.

"Paul," I said, partly to excuse Paul and partly to enliven the situation which was getting awfully depressed, "isn't a 'dyed in the wool' farmer, Mr. Boalt?"

"No." He glanced at Paul tolerantly. "And it's a serious undertaking, to be taken seriously."

"You bet, it looked serious for us," again contributed Paul.

"A fellow can get by on the land if he attends to business," Halleck spoke up. "Of course he has to work hard, but he's always got something under and back of him. Where are you in the city when you lose your job? (And it isn't always a fellow's fault if he does.) You're facing a sour-faced landlady requesting your month's rent in advance — or the Park bench."

Francis Boalt nodded approval at him. "It's a grand struggle," he pursued; "but it's a fight for young blood, not old."

I shivered at this continued repetition. It sounded vampirish, this insatiable hunger of the soil for hot young blood. Not liking the discussion, I said:

"You are going back to attend the wedding?"

"I shall. And I shall probably not return here," he answered with impressive finality.

"What will you do with the ranch?" I asked.

He waved his hand impotently, and I saw that the question hurt too deeply for an answer at that moment. I was glad when Mary came in just then, bearing a tray with cakes and lemonade.

Halleck shoved aside a pile of books on the center table. Mary set her tray down and bustled about serving us. She whispered to me as she passed the cake.

"I didn't get to show you my new dress." She bobbed her head as she went on. "I will. It's black satin, with beads."

The cake and lemonade were delicious. The boys enjoyed it I'm sure, but we weren't a very merry group because Francis Boalt was so terribly cut up. He didn't seem to be able to rouse out of his dignified gloom.

Soon after Mary had shown me her new

dress, and pointed out in the catalogue the hat she had sent for, I proposed going home.

We bade them good night. Francis Boalt looked so sad and broken that honestly, though it was silly, I almost wished my taste had run to elderly attorneys.

On the road home Paul remarked: "It's hit the old fellow an awful wallop, hasn't it? Gee! I'd hate to be Timothy Boalt with a million hanging over my head!"

CHAPTER XXIV

"BLOOD WIPES OUT DISHONOR"

September came and the last hay crop, for we would let the cows take the rest of the year's growth on our pastures. *Our* pastures, for the thing was settled now. The time was up. The books and the appraisal of the stock and ranch conditions proved beyond a doubt that Uncle Nat had won his bet on the Manheim blood.

In respect to the Torrels I didn't forget the fact that my brush had helped old Father Land in defeating the Odd Fellows' hopes; yet I counted that to his credit, in a way, because I had found my subjects here and had used the time that I might have been hoeing in the garden.

After all I couldn't help feeling with Francis Boalt that the land, hard master though it was, was still something strong, patient and enduring under your feet. And because it does flout man's best endeavor; you know that man's wastrel hand *cannot* tear it up and destroy it at his will. It stands staunch and indestructible, one with God and the stars.

The years had been hard;—I felt quite

seasoned. I looked down at my hands, red and rough, with an enlarged knuckle or two where I had sprained my fingers pulling weeds and wringing clothes. But, after all, it had not been so bad; five years must leave some trace of their passing.

The greater thing was that Paul was strong and brown, and very much the man. True he was more careless in his speech, less apt to remember the small courtesies; inclined to wear his hat in the house and be economical of shaving soap; yet these were minor things that would be easily overcome, back where they meant so much in the measure of a man.

He had gone to town directly after dinner and had not yet returned. I was sitting out on the porch waiting for the men to come in to supper, but they were working late to get in the last load of hay. A thunder storm, rare for this time of year, gathered in the west. Great black clouds piled up mountain high and stretched themselves in a somber sheet, shot through with fiery zig-zags of lightning, bringing to my mind the phrase: "With the far lightning on your wings, while the dark cloud covers the doorway." Only there was no dark cloud over my doorway, thank God!

The gate clicked and I saw old man Graham hurrying up the walk.

A few drops of rain came pattering down, so I called cordially:

"Hurry, Mr. Graham! It's going to rain hard. You're out at a bad time."

He glanced up furtively at the sky, and swung out of his course and came to where I sat. Ill-looking as he was, he suggested to me the way a bootlegger should look with the grizzled stubble on his square face, and his rusty brown coat with a three cornered rent in the skirt.

He didn't raise his battered old felt hat as was his usual custom, but he stopped in front of me and glowered fiercely. Faintly amused, for I had never considered him otherwise than absurd, I said: "Good evening."

He gave his lips an ugly twist. "Is Paul Torrel here?"

"No, he isn't," I said politely. "He went to town and hasn't yet returned."

"He'd better git back," he snarled; "'tain't no use of his leavin' the country. The Sheriff kin find him."

"What are you talking about?" I asked coldly.

"I'm talkin' about that brother of yours; that fine young city man," he shouted; "who was hangin' around my house all last spring, forcin' his unwelcome attentions on my girl."

I laughed involuntarily.

“ But he'll do the square thing now. I won't have my little girl's life ruind — ”

“ Mr. Graham! ” I interrupted. “ I don't know what you are talking about. ” The insulting old fellow! He must have been drinking some of his own brew. “ What do you want? ”

An appalling clap of thunder drowned his answer, but he got up in front of me, his unshaven face working furiously, and pawed the air. Shreds of lining dangled from his ragged coat sleeves, like wriggling worms. I didn't get a word of what he said until the thunder rolled away behind the hills, and I caught the last.

“ He thinks he'll run away from it, as likely he's done before, but by God! He'll marry her, or I'll shoot 'im down like the damn dog he is! Yes, marry her, and that damn soon! ”

I sat up. The zig-zag lightning darted between my eyes and his anger-flushed face. The import of his words struck me like cold rain.

“ Paul? Paul! ” I sprang to my feet. I felt my face go white, and shrink until it was hard and stiff like stone. My tongue couldn't speak again, and my whole body grew numb.

But the insane man spared neither Paul nor me. My very soul turned sick as he raved and

shouted and danced about like a bug on a hot lid.

Finally I got my voice and said wearily, though it seemed like someone else who spoke:

“Hush, Mr. Graham! If Paul has done wrong he will right it.” Even loving Paul as I did, many things came to my recollection, sharp as the angles of the lightning, and I felt, hideous as the thing was, it might be true.

The air darkened and the rain came with a rush. The sky sent down deluge after deluge as if in effort to wash the stained old world free from another sin. I welcomed it. It seemed to me it was the storm within my soul that raged. The yard was flooded with tawny rivers, and the laden fruit trees cracked under the added burden of the rain.

I didn't know when or how Graham got away. I sat there with the rain beating in on me until I was wet to the skin, and my thin white dress clung to me like a model's drape.

I heard the men come running through the deluge, laughing and shouting and swearing hilariously.

The call of the hired man's demand for food was pre-eminent. I got up, changed hastily into dry garments, and went to put supper on the table.

I dished up potatoes and carrots and fried

onions; I sliced bread and cold ham and set them on the table, while all the time the rain and hail beating on the roof seemed to be striking against my heart. The deluge pounded down with an incessant roar, lessened, passed, swung around and came back again like a giant bellowing for admittance. The thunder crashed around us and the house darkened so that I had to light the lamps while the men ate. And all during that terrible hour the darkness and storm were hammering at my sick soul.

Paul did not come. Somebody remarked it, and Halleck noted my strange face, for I saw him looking at me with anxiety in his eyes.

I couldn't eat, but I sat there and listened to their talk and attended to their wants. After supper they all went out, even Halleck. I washed the dishes and went again to the porch.

The storm had passed and the stars shone mildly down on the beaten earth. The plants had not yet lifted up their heads. An appalling waste of ripe yellow fruit, wet and sodden, lay under the peach trees, and the flood-waters pouring into the creek below filled the ear with a loud roaring.

I sat down to watch the empty road, knowing that Paul would come sooner or later. In a few minutes I heard a step on the back porch. It continued through the house and came up

behind me. I wondered if it could be Paul though I had not heard the car come.

It was Halleck. He had put on clean dry clothes and I smelled the faint odor of tobacco as he knelt beside me, put his arms around me and kissed my cheek. He didn't ask any questions. I appreciated that, but I shrank away from his kiss; and his arms around me, tender as was his touch, suffocated me.

Somehow the thought gripped me and would not leave me. He knew. Perhaps he had seen the man Graham; perhaps they all knew. Possibly the whole countryside was aware, or had suspicioned; only I had been blind and ignorant. I drew farther away from his touch.

My aversion cut him deeply. I felt him quiver. His arms tightened, and he broke, as had the storm, his long self-imposed silence and cried out:

"Annette, Annette! I love you. I want you. I want to be near you to protect and help you. Marry me, dear, soon, now."

At the word, a shame of sex I had never thought of before, flooded me, overwhelmed me, beat me down like the prostrate asters lying by the path. I flung out of his arms.

"Don't talk to me! Never! I hate you!"

He fell back as if I had stabbed him; his arms dropped, paralyzed by my brutality. He rose

to his feet and stood there mute, and I knew how white his face grew and how piteous his sensitive mouth. I knew too, at that moment as I had not before, that he loved me — that the ranch had no part in his feeling. He loved me as truly and unselfishly as is possible for men to love.

The roar of the rushing water pounded in my ears, but I heard his gentle voice.

“Forgive me Annette. Forget what I have said. You are in trouble tonight, I know. Isn’t there some way I can help; I want to.”

Conscious of my cruelty, even then I didn’t answer him. I sat there, turned to stone again.

He laid his hand on my shoulder, a mute caress. “Annette.”

I did not respond by so much as a quiver of the flesh.

Silenced, he turned to go, but I did not stretch out my hand to him.

I sat there chilled to the bone and watched the cold stars look down on the empty road until midnight, my mind whirling round and round in a blind rage; my hatred of the ranch, the loneliness and isolation of the life. If this terrible thing were true, it was the fault of the environment, not Paul’s fault. Dependent on women he was, but not vicious. In the civic centers there would have been something worth

while to have taken Celia's place, some choice, *something* to have filled his life. But here in the isolation bred to the service of the soil there was nothing. And where there is nothing in a man's life, something worse than nothing must fill the void.

At midnight I heard Paul drive in, and soon he came through the house walking unsteadily like a drunken man, yet searching unerringly for me, as if he knew that I would be up and waiting for him.

"Annette!"

"I am here, Paul."

He came out on the porch, and even in the dusk of the starlight, I could see the haggard pallor of his face. He stopped beside me.

"Dear!" I said, for I knew he was going to tell me.

He dropped down on the steps and looked straight ahead of him.

"I've married her," he blurted out; "but as God hears me! I'll never live with her."

"Was it necessary?" I heard my strained voice ask.

"She says so."

"It could be possible."

He shrank as the probe touched the truth, and bent his head.

Something dropped in me like a weight,

though a hideous fear had possessed me from the first.

"Then — you have made all the amends possible; done all there is to do?"

"Yes; except leave the damned country or — kill myself. I — I can't face it," he whispered huskily. His head went down on his knees, and I knew that even I could not realize the wretchedness that submerged him.

My throat contracted so that I couldn't speak. I got up and slid down beside him, and as I put my arms around his bowed head, he began to shake with terrible sobs.

I broke down too, and we wept together sobbing and clinging to each other like two lost children, until we were both spent and quiet.

I heard the clock strike two.

"We had better go to bed, Paul," I said. We rose together. "We have that crew of men —" I couldn't speak of anything deeper. "They got the hay all in before the storm."

"That's good," he said, but I knew he wasn't thinking of the hay.

"Good night, Annette." He kissed me twice and repeated, "Good night."

His stillness, the hard control of his voice put me in a panic. I held to him.

"Paul, Paul, Paul!" I kept saying his name over and over again, unable to let him go.

He picked me up in his arms and carried me to the door of my room, and put me down. We stood there clasping each other, my arms around his neck and his face buried in my hair.

At last he loosed my arms, saying, "Good night, Sister. Go to bed." Again he kissed me and went to his room.

I crept into my bed with no thought of sleeping. But I was so exhausted with the strain of it all that I slept soundly, and I never heard the shot which came about four o'clock, washing out Paul's dishonor in blood.

CHAPTER XXV

HALLECK PROVES HIS LOVE

I don't know how I got through that first terrible day; I can't remember. I only remember Halleck Trent's face as he stopped me from going into Paul's room, and how he stayed with me while I crouched outside the door, blind and sick until somebody came — it might have been Mrs. Forest, and took me away, and I lay in my room alone while the house seemed alive with people.

When they took me in to see Paul his face was covered, and they wouldn't let me lift the cloth. I went back into my own room and stayed there, not wanting to see any of them, kind as they were.

Next evening, I suppose it was, for the room seemed to get darker, the door opened and I heard Martha's voice: "Miss Annette, child —" I sprang up and ran into her arms.

It seemed so good to rest on Martha's cushiony breast and feel her big, soft hands patting my shoulders.

"I come, dearie, soon's I got Mr. Halleck's telegram."

"Martha, Martha!" I clung to her, knowing that it was Martha whom I wanted, yet I hadn't thought of sending for her because I couldn't think of anything, except Paul.

We sat there together in the dark for a long time until I got able to talk, and tell Martha all about it, and Martha said:

"Mr. Halleck telegraphed yesterday, but I didn't know what had happened until he met me at the station. But dearie, I don't blame Paul a speck. If the poor lamb could only have known nobody blamed him! Oh, dearie, it's awful! I feel so bad I could die."

"No, we can't, Martha," I said wearily; "I've just been lying here thinking about that."

I told Martha I couldn't have a public funeral, but she thought it wasn't quite right. I heard her say so to Halleck afterward, she thought the neighbors would all think it queer when they had been so kind. He answered:

"Hang the neighbors! They're not the ones to be considered."

I felt the same way. I didn't care how kind the country people were. I didn't care how they felt. It was my Paul. I remembered at Mr. Cross's burial how they all talked and visited, and all walked around to view his dead face. Paul should not be subjected to that.

I was glad Francis Boalt and Mary were away, and I didn't even want Halleck Trent.

I asked old Gene to drive the car for Martha and me to the Cemetery. The minister came and the sexton, with the hearse covered with flowers.

But when we came out of the house Halleck put us in the car, and got in behind the wheel, and old Gene sat beside him.

So we few laid Paul in the Manheim plot beside the graves of Uncle Nat and Aunt Miriam and their five children. We covered the coarse red earth with sweet smelling blossoms until it was like a garden in a desert.

I laid the last wreath of dewy roses around the headboard marked with his name, "Paul Elliot Torrel."

I knelt beside it. Paul was there under all that heavy red earth, with his face covered; and I must leave him there alone. But I couldn't do it.

"Paul, Paul," I whispered; "I won't leave you. I'll stay with you."

I told them all so. I said clearly — I didn't feel like crying:

"You can all go now. I'm going to stay here with Paul."

They didn't answer. I bent again over the flowers, telling Paul how I loved him and not

to feel lonely or forgotten. It seemed to me I could see him uncover his face and smile, and say: "I know, Puss."

I thought they were all gone, but somebody stooped over me.

"Come dearie!" It was Martha's voice and Martha's touch and, as I looked up, Martha's eyes streaming with tears. She tried to draw me away.

"Let's go, dearie. Come away! Paul's all quiet and safe now. Come, lovey. You can't do anything more for him."

"Yes, Martha; I can." I unwrapped her arms from around me. "I'm going to stay. He wants me. He always looked for me — anything he couldn't understand. I'm sure he can't understand now, down there — it's so *far* down — and all that heavy earth over him —" I pushed her away. "*Don't* try to make me leave Paul."

I heard her cry: "Oh, dearie, dearie! You *must* come! Mr. Halleck, tell her —"

Another voice said; it sounded a long way off. "Of course she can stay if Paul wants her."

I heard them all go, and I was alone again with Paul to tell him all the things I had forgotten to tell him before his face was covered.

It took a long time. The glory went out of

the air and long gray shadows crept across the garden where Paul lay. They spread and spread all over the ground and the dried white tufts of grass growing everywhere, and rose up in the air — a dark curtain covering the doorway of the world! Then I knew it, the dark curtain wrapping me in its black folds; and fear clutched me.

I stood up and looked fearfully about me. It was not a curtain, but more terrifying still, dusky night with bright-eyed stars looking down on me, motionless white stones standing sentinel over the dead around me, and Paul's new grave at my feet. It was I who was alone — and night! And Paul could not hear me if I cried out.

I turned, bewildered, shivering with cold and dread all through my numbed body. But a shadowy shape stood near; I wasn't alone. My fears vanished. I put out my hand.

"Paul. Is it Paul?"

"Not Paul," answered a clear voice: "But I am here. Do you want to go now? Martha and Gene are in the car, waiting. Hadn't we better go?"

It was Halleck Trent. His warm fingers touched mine.

"I am so cold! So *cold!*"

He slipped out of his coat. I felt him guide

my chilled hands into the sleeves and draw it snugly up around my shoulders. He took my arm and led me away, past the still white shafts, patient and careful with my stumbling feet, until I heard the car door slam behind me, and felt Martha's warm bosom under my tired head.

CHAPTER XXVI

"ALL THE TOMORROWS"

The next few days, Martha took care of me like a baby, but I knew that mustn't go on. I couldn't lean on anyone now; I had to face everything, and depend on myself.

My first thought was to get away from the ranch, but when Martha asked me what I expected to do, it suddenly came to me I hadn't any place to go.

Serena wrote and asked me to come there, but I couldn't think of going to Serena and have her ask questions. Yet when Dustan wrote such a wonderfully kind and understanding letter, saying that his mother wanted me, I replied that I would stay there until I could get me a little flat.

There were so many things to do before I could leave. There was the ranch first of all. I couldn't just get up and leave it. There were the cows and horses, the pigs, chickens and Zed; all the live things that were dependent on someone to care for them.

I asked Halleck if he still cared to retain the Managership.

He said, "No," not offering any explanation.

But he said he would stay until I could get someone else. He looked awfully thin and worn.

I remembered his ring which that morning I had slipped into my apron pocket to return to him. I took it out and handed it to him.

He accepted it in a sort of indifferent way and dropped it into his pocket, but his eyes made me think of ash covered embers with the fire gone out.

Remembering how kind he had been, I said: "I'm afraid we made a great mistake."

"I suppose so," he answered, and went outside. Later he came in to tell me that he had seen Mr. Cattman who knew of a good man wanting to rent a dairy. Perhaps I should like to see the man.

I telephoned to Mr. Jones, the prospective renter, and he came to look at the place. He was a funny little tow-headed man with three of his front teeth gone, but Mr. Cattman had recommended him as a "hell tooter" for work.

It didn't take us long to make a bargain. I let him have everything just as it stood, to take possession as soon as I went away. He had a family and I couldn't have them in the house until after I was gone. Directly this was settled, Martha and I began to get things ready to go.

There was so much to do. Picking up and leaving a house after you have lived there a long time, is an awfully hard experience. It was doubly hard for me because everything I did reminded me of the time Paul and I had packed to come to the ranch.

There were all of Paul's things to be put away, his clothes, letters, gifts, and personal belongings that speak so plainly of the one gone. I could hardly bring myself to do it, yet I couldn't let anyone else touch them. Even Martha's kind old hands among his things, hurt me.

When I came to his desk, there were Celia's letters all tied up in a package with a blue ribbon that she had taken off her hair one evening and tied around Zed's neck. I remembered how we all laughed at Zed's antics to get it off. And in a locked drawer to which I fitted a key, I found a gold heart-shaped locket with "From Celia to Paul" engraved in one side of the case, and the other half contained a beautiful picture of Celia.

I knew then that there must have been some understanding between them before she had gone away that winter. But what had happened? I don't believe Paul himself ever knew.

Looking into Celia's lovely face, everything swept over me so that it seemed I couldn't bear

it. I cried and cried until Martha coming in, found me and made me go out of the room.

It seemed that I should never get through with all the things. And when I thought of all the stock, the pigs and chickens I had helped raise, Zed, and all my flowers that Paul and I had worked over together, and even the Dodge and the little old Ford, they all seemed personal as if each thing was a part of me, and Paul.

When we had left the city we had just packed our things and turned the door key over to the landlady and that was all there was to it. Ownership makes such a difference.

When the neighbors knew I was going away, a number of them came to tell me good-bye; the Cattmans, the Forests, and the Arpsbaggers and others. They all hoped we'd meet again, but I knew that we wouldn't. I never wanted to see anybody again, or anything that would remind me of the ranch.

Halleck Trent took us to the station, attended to our luggage, got our tickets, and found us a seat on the shady side of the car.

He and I did not say anything to each other. He held a quiet, self-constrained air, and had a tragic look in his eyes. I just touched his hand in parting. It was cold as ice.

The tears ran frankly down on Martha's new veil as she said:

“ Good-bye, Mr. Halleck, child.” And then she flung her veil back and gave him a hearty smack.

I thought he was going to cry too, his voice sounded so shaky as he said, “ Good-bye, Martha,” and turned and left the car.

“ I feel terrible sorry for the child.” Martha seated herself amply. “ He’s grievin’ himself sick. Poor child!” She said again. “ Look around and wave to him, Miss Annette. He’s got an awful gentle heart.”

I looked around to please Martha, but he had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE CITY

Dustan met us at the Ferry Building with a closed car. He looked so clean and well set up, and the clasp of his warm hand was like coming into a shelter after being out in a cold wind.

There was such a noisy, jostling crowd I was glad to be piloted out of it into the car and have the door close, shutting all of it out.

Dustan got in and looked around to ask if we were perfectly comfortable.

I nodded and sank back into the cushions. Martha sat upright holding her bag in her black gloved hand, and said "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," to Dustan's remarks.

I looked at him in a please-I-don't-want-to-talk way, and he understood, and addressed his conversation to Martha. It just seemed so nice to me to sit there quietly and watch Dustan dodge skillfully in and out through the crowded traffic.

He drove out to a number on Larkin Street which Martha gave as her working place, and stopped in front of a house with high steps.

Martha kissed me good-bye. "Come and

see me, dearie," she said and when Dustan opened the door, she got out carefully, backwards, pulling her wide black skirts after her.

She began thanking him, but he took her suitcase and her arm and helped her up the steps and rang the bell. She shook hands with him, and turned again toward me. So I carried away with me the picture of her round red smiling face under her little black hat, before the opening door had swallowed her and her bag.

The Carters lived up on California near Mason, so the sun was nearly down, and the fog was rolling in through the Golden Gate when we arrived at Dustan's home.

Serena was out, but Mrs. Carter was waiting for us. She was so like Dustan as she came forward to meet me, tall and aristocratic looking like him, and her hair was silvery gray.

She kissed me with gracious warmth, saying, "Serena will be here soon; she just telephoned. Come this way. You must be very tired."

She led the way into a blue panelled bed room which was new to me, and the windows of which were hung with silver and blue curtains.

"You see, we have moved since you were here before."

"I like it better than the old house," I man-

aged to say. "And it's very lovely of you to ask me here."

She laid her white, ringed hand on my arm, with a beautiful, maternal gesture. "It's more lovely to have you come!" She turned to answer Dustan's rap on the door. He had brought my suitcase — and had set it inside the door. With a wish that I might find everything convenient, his mother followed him out.

I combed my hair and changed my traveling suit into something more suitable for the house and returned to the living room.

Serena got up out of a deep-cushioned chair to meet me. She kissed me and insisted on my sitting in the chair which, she said, was the most comfortable in the room.

Serena had certainly changed: she was more fashionable, less amply curved, and just now, her patronage had the charm of sincerity. She sat opposite me on a dark blue Davenport and talked pleasantly, until Mr. Carter came in just before dinner.

He was fair and overflowing like Serena, inclined to be dominant, and his head was quite bald. He shook my hand heartily and hoped that I had come for a long stay.

I felt embarrassed as I resumed my seat. Kind as they were, and though I had known

them all before, they almost seemed like strangers, but they made every effort to have me feel that I had dropped into a waiting niche.

Understanding how wretched I was, after the trouble I had passed through, they let me go to bed directly after dinner. Mrs. Carter came to my room to ask if there was any possible thing that she could do for me. I thanked her and told her I wanted nothing. But when I curled up in that dainty blue and white bed, I never felt so lonely in my life.

In spite of all their kindness during the following days, I felt I could not stay at their house. Dustan wanted me to marry him at once, and even his mother put in a small plea for him. But I couldn't do it; I just *couldn't*.

I made myself think over and over again how wonderful it would be to live in Dustan's life, to be one of that lovely family (barring Serena, and she had improved); to be surrounded and wrapped up in Dustan's never failing affection; to share in his genius and the world's praise; to belong to Dustan himself. But something gripped me and held me back, and sent me into a passion of tears when he mentioned his desire.

I was terribly ashamed of myself, and sorry for Dustan, but I couldn't help it; I cried and cried, and Dustan, perforce, had to give up the idea, and wait.

But I had to go away from there. Serena liked to go and have company, and I wasn't any addition to gaiety; so Dustan helped me to find a cosy place about six blocks from there.

It had one room with a wide north window which Dustan said at once, could be my studio. It took at least two weeks to fix it all up to suit me. I worked hard to get it all done, and I was almost happy as I worked; but when I had finished, I sat down in the middle of my studio floor and wondered what on earth I should do with my time.

To cook for one when I had had six or eight; three tiny rooms to clean when I had been used to a whole house; no porches or walks to sweep, no garden to weed or lamps to fill, no bread to make, no chickens, dogs or pigs to feed, no wood to bring in or ashes to empty, a pretense at washing and ironing! I couldn't paint all the time.

When Dustan came in on me with a big bunch of roses in his hand, I was crying like a baby.

I choked back my tears and got up from the floor with a pretense at respectability. I couldn't have Dustan see me weeping all the time. I put the flowers in water, and showed him all over the tiny apartment.

"And now," I said forlornly; "I don't know what to do."

Dustan said: "There is an especially good offering at the Columbia this afternoon. Perhaps you would like to see it."

That was the way Dustan tried to soften my sorrow and my loneliness without Paul, and as the days went by I began to slip into the old life with some degree of content.

Several of the old bunch came to see me, and they all had the same idea that now the farm was mine, I must be fabulously wealthy.

I didn't put myself out to dispute it. I didn't care about that or anything else. Nothing seemed of great importance.

I went to see Pinky and her two pretty babies. She didn't look much as she did that first summer when they all came to the ranch. Thin and awfully delicate looking, she spent most of her time telling me how ill she felt, and how difficult it was to do her work.

"We generally take dinner out. If we didn't, Annette, I just couldn't *stand* it. And Jimmy says he doesn't want me to kill myself."

I told her about Mrs. Forest and Mrs. Keene, and she almost fainted.

"I don't see how farm women stand it," she sighed, delicately shaking her head at me;

“but I suppose the real farm women are strong as horses.”

I didn't want to slap Pinky in her own house so I cut my visit short, but I did say that one seldom could see a farm woman lying down on the job. However this passed over Pinky's marcelled head, because she thought she was the most overworked woman in California.

I enjoyed Elsie Stein. She was the head of her department in a big office down town. She wore mannish clothes, and had the thin-lipped, pert independence of the business woman.

She was full of pep though — no whining delicacy about her! Also she was given to glorifying her single state and pitying married women; but I soon discovered that she had her competent eye on Dustan. She didn't dream that anyone could see how interested she was in him, and I don't think that Dustan more than knew that she was alive.

It was she who told me what an excitement Dustan's picture of “The Farm Woman” had created, both here and in the East. It had been accepted in Paris, and had made a stir there.

“We'll envy you, having such a famous husband,” she said experimentally.

I smiled and said; “That will be pleasant.”

I didn't tell her anything. She might find out in due time.

One day I went out to Larkin Street to see Martha. She was seated in her room, in an enormous gray wrapper, darning stockings.

"Oh, dearie, dearie!" She rose up and smothered me in her arms. "Sit in this rocking chair. I've been wondering such a lot about you and wanting to see you. You look beautiful, Miss Annette! And how is Mr. Dustan?"

We had a good long talk. Martha got some cakes and made a cup of tea, and while I drank she told me everything that had happened since the night Dustan had left her at her door.

"Mary didn't like it in Chicago, and has gone back to Stonehouse County," she said. "Mr. Boalt's place is rented to a family, Tim Boalt sent out from the East. They wanted somebody to cook, so Mary is right back in her own kitchen."

"How nice!" I said taking another cake.

"Take two," insisted Martha shaking the tea pot, "and there's more tea. Mary doesn't like the city. She stopped here one day on her way back from Chicago. She wanted to see you — but dearie — you were up at Mr. Dustan's —" Martha paused respectfully at Dustan's name and threaded her darning needle.

“ I’d have been glad to see you, just the same, Martha,” I assured her. (But what would Serena have thought?) “ And now I have a flat of my own, so you must come to see me sometime.”

“ Yes, dearie; I will,” promised Martha examining her stocking for another hole; “ and lovey — Mary said that Mr. and Mrs. Cattman have gone to Los Angeles, and Mr. Halleck has rented their place.”

“ Has he? ”

“ I don’t see how the poor child’s going to do anything all by himself,” commented Martha.

“ I’ve no doubt he’ll get along, Martha,” I remarked. “ Does Francis Boalt like it in Chicago? ”

“ Not too much. But dearie! ” Martha looked shocked at her own lack; “ I’m forgetting. I must tell you all about the wedding. Mary said it was grand! ”

CHAPTER XXVIII

CELIA HEARS OF PAUL'S DEATH —

The next day Dustan took me to an exhibition of paintings at the St. Francis, and we had lunch there.

Later as we wandered around the exhibition room looking at the pictures, we came face to face with Celia Parker and her husband.

It was a terrible shock to me, but there was no escape. She looked lovelier than ever except that her face seemed so pale and tiny set above her handsome furs, and her eyes looked strange and sad.

She kissed me in the same old impulsive way, and presented her husband to Dustan.

I know that my own face must have been ghastly, but Dustan's presence supported me. I asked her questions and she answered them. She asked me questions, to which I replied.

She said they were starting south to Florida the next day, and how long did I expect to be away from the ranch? Then Mr. Parker said to me:

“Where is the good looking young man, your brother, Miss Torrel?”

“ Paul? ” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “ He’s — there. He — was killed — you know — an accident.”

“ Ah! ” he said regretfully.

But Celia’s lovely eyes caught at mine in fright; her face turned white and rigid as marble. With a faint, smothered cry she dropped to the floor and lay there a pitiful heap in her costly furs.

Her husband turned in alarm and gathered her up in his arms, calling loudly for assistance which came running.

Dustan and I slipped away in the commotion.

“ You know, Dustan,” I explained; “ in some way Celia was the indirect cause of Paul’s death.”

“ She must know it,” said Dustan. “ You women have a great deal on your hands sometimes, Annette.”

I didn’t say anything. I thought of Halleck Trent, yet I wondered if Dustan was speaking for himself.

It was three days before the Parkers left the city. Dustan and I both telephoned and sent flowers, but I did not see Celia again.

From Tampa she sent me a letter. And at the end she wrote:

“ It isn’t right, Annette, for parents to map out their children’s lives too closely. I always

thought I had to do exactly as my father planned for me. I know, now that it is too late, that in some things this is a terrible mistake, even a sin."

That was all, but I'm sure she felt that I would understand. Truly:

"It's an awkward thing to play with souls,
And matter enough to save one's own."

I hoped that Mr. Hilyard's warped soul would be eternally damned for the hurt he had done Paul!

One day I met him on the street where Post runs into Market. Evidently he was waiting for a car. Well dressed, prosperous and smiling, he greeted me delightedly:

"Why Miss Torrel! This is an unexpected pleasure."

I bowed coldly. "How do you do, Mr. Hilyard," I said and passed on.

CHAPTER XXIX

AND MARTHA WAS SO FLUSTRATED — SHE HAD
ON ONE WHITE STOCKING, AND THE
OTHER WAS BLACK

After the meetings with Celia and Mr. Hil-yard I lived everything all over again, and was nearly crazy. I couldn't stand the loneliness of the flat so I rented it and went to a boarding house for a few weeks.

It was better there because I saw people, and had someone to talk to. But I soon got so weary of the same people every day, I couldn't stand them. I moved to another hotel. It was the same thing, so I moved again.

Dustan worried terribly over it. He urged me to marry him, and we'd take a long trip over entirely new scenes, and perhaps I could forget.

I didn't weep over his suggestion, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I think if Dustan had kidnapped me it would have been all right; but he didn't do that. Naturally he wanted me to make up my own mind, but I didn't seem to have any mind to make up.

It was hard for him. He couldn't get down to his work because he had me and my troubles

forever on his mind. I urged him to go away and perhaps I would work it out for myself; but he couldn't do that, either.

It wasn't a very profitable winter for anybody. Serena was very gay, going and giving parties and nearly always having a housefull, which annoyed Dustan so much that he finally moved away from his home to bachelor quarters in the Nob Hill region, and had his studio there.

It became the meeting place for artists and art students of talent, and we had times really worth while there. They were quiet, friendly affairs where those who had arrived and those who were on the way met and had tea and talked art or anything else of interest, but of course painting was the main pivot.

I attempted to get back into the work, but I knew that Dustan was disappointed over what I accomplished, and I knew that in my own stiff, heavy touch a great deal of the fault lay.

But I enjoyed these meetings better than anything else. Elsie Stein was the only outsider, except Serena of course, who swooped down on us all at intervals, and once Dustan had Martha over.

Martha's advent into the circle was very funny, and she was so frustrated that she came

wearing one white stocking and one black one. She didn't discover it until after she arrived, and her efforts to hide her props were pathetic.

Of course nobody knew who she was, so Dustan introduced her as his aunt, and she was supposed to be the chaperone. At first she sat up stiff and funny, for her stockings took the spontaneity out of her, but her natural kindness couldn't long be suppressed, and soon she was mothering us all, and they thought her peculiarities were due to the fact of her near relation to genius such as Dustan's.

I hadn't laughed so much since I came to the city as I did that night; and Martha had the time of her life. Once she beckoned me over to her side.

"Dearie," she said; "did I tell you that the Cattmans are going to New York in the spring to see Norah, and Mr. Halleck is dickering to buy their place?"

"The country will all be changing hands soon," I replied. Why should Halleck Trent's movements interest me? "I had a letter from Mr. Jones today asking me if I would consider selling my place on long time payments."

"You're not going to do it, are you?"

"I don't know? I haven't decided. I want to sell."

The people began leaving just then and they

came clustering to tell their hostess goodnight.

She shook hands with each one, her round red face beaming, saying "Now lovey" and "Now dearie, wrap up good around your ears. And be sure, dearies, to breathe through your noses when you git out in the cold fog."

After they were gone she got on her own vast wrap and hat and kissed Elsie and me good night. Her fat round face looked so funny as she held out her cushiony hand to Dustan, awe and affection fighting for supremacy.

"Good night, Mr. Dustan, sir," she said. "I've got to go. I've had a nice time."

Dustan said, "But I'm going to see you to your car, Martha." He gave her his arm. She took it and looked back over her shoulder at Elsie and me, beaming proudly.

We skipped after them as far as the door.

Dustan was handing her into the taxi, and alas for Martha's elegance! As she stepped in, the street lamp revealed clearly her stout black and white legs.

"Isn't that a scream!" said Elsie.

Dustan came back delighted with his aunt's social success. He took us home and at my door I paused:

"Thank you Dustan — for — about Martha —" I knew he had done it just to amuse me.

He smiled rarely. If he had only known then, to say something — I think I should have married him the next day. But Elsie was there. She laughed her thin-lipped laugh — no sentiment could live near that sound.

“ Oh, Dusty; you’re a scream! ”

CHAPTER XXX

THE BROKEN STATUE

I moved once more over to where Elsie Stein boarded, and there I stayed until spring.

We had good times together. Dustan took us around quite a bit or we went alone, we two. We did about the same things over and over, and when spring came, it was little different from winter; shows, music, matinées, lectures and shopping for amusement, and fog, wind, rain and sunshine, just about the same as winter weather.

We used to talk sometimes about the wonderful and absolute change of winter into spring in the country, for Elsie hadn't forgotten the farm. Sometimes she was silly enough to say she'd like to go back. I'd remind her of a few things and she'd get over the idea.

I didn't want to think about the ranch, but I did. I couldn't help wondering how my orange trees got through the winter, if it was cold enough to freeze the early Chinese lilies and the crocuses; if the hens laid during February and if old Marko had had her usual heifer calf — she hadn't missed once in all the five years. One day I met Martha in the Em-

porium. — She told me that Mary had sent me word that the lupin was running all over everywhere this spring. Mary remembered how crazy I was over it.

I had another letter from Al Jones wanting me to come up and look over the place. If I wouldn't sell, he wanted a long time lease.

That afternoon Dustan came over and said that Serena was having a tea at his studio. She had a discovery to exploit, one Guiseppe Ghiselli, whose specialty was sculpture. He wanted me to go.

I got ready and just as we were starting, Elsie came home, so we asked her also. As it wasn't far and such a pretty May afternoon I said:

“ Let's walk.”

There was no hint of fog, one of those days when you can see the Farralones out beyond the Golden Gate. The sky was almost as blue as Stonehouse County skies, and the sun almost as warm.

We went up a quiet street, not much traffic, but at the corner a truck was stalled. The driver, a farmer, I could tell by his stubbly chin, was out looking into the thing's internals, with his face all screwed up. I felt sorry for the poor man. I remembered when the Ford used to get stuck for no apparent reason.

He had a new plow with a handsome red beam and shiny shares, and a curious attachment for turning under weeds, which I couldn't help stopping to look at. Perhaps Mr. Jones would be interested in it.

Dustan's expression of polite inquiry, when I peeked into the truck, embarrassed me.

"That's such a good looking plow," I said; "I wanted to see —"

"Oh, come on —" commanded Elsie. "I thought you'd got rid of the farming bug. Hurry her along, Dusty; or she'll be running off with that string bean."

Dustan laughed indulgently. I got back on the sidewalk, wondering what made me do such a silly thing.

The studio was already crowded when we arrived. Serena, beautifully gowned in gold colored satin, was getting more charming every time she introduced Guiseppe Ghiselli.

He stood near Serena, small and dark, very Italian looking, with melting black eyes.

"He is a bunch of garlic," whispered Elsie as we edged our way through the press of geniuses and would-be's, possibilities and hopeless cases, all chattering graciously or standing aloof in well bred or fidgetty silence, as individual dispositions decreed.

"He reminds me of one Tony Mendoza who

worked at the ranch," I returned as we approached the sculptor.

Serena presented us. He bowed low over our hands and casually introduced Art as a natural topic of conversation.

I didn't feel inclined to talk Art. Al Jones's letter, full of queer spelling, kept repeating itself to me. I didn't want to go up to the ranch, yet I wondered if I should.

I listened smilingly to Mr. Ghiselli until he turned his eyes away a moment to give height and breadth to a wonderful façade he was describing, then I dodged behind a fat art enthusiast with a *pince nez*, and fled. I felt Elsie's menacing glare and her tug at my blouse, for Elsie was decidedly short on art, but I didn't care. I made the far wall of the room my limit, and sat down in a corner behind a palm, that Serena had imported into the studio for the occasion.

My mind sped back to the ranch, thinking of the May afternoons under my oaks, the lupin on the hills, and the reflections of the sunset colors in the river, of the hot scent of the alfalfa fields, the night the barn burned, and Zed's timely appearance one other night, of Dick Patton's near death, of Dad's picturesque language, of Paul, and Halleck Trent's face — that morning — "

Somebody sat down beside me. "You are interested in art, Miss Torrel?"

I looked around. It was Ghiselli looking at me with soulful eyes.

"I? Oh yes," I admitted; "intensely. But it's almost haying time now."

The sculptor's dark eyes, full of the poetry of his Latin race, popped open in amazement.

Dustan touched his sleeve. "Come, Ghiselli. I've something to show you. Annette I want you to see this. It arrived this afternoon from Italy; I've just unpacked it."

We rose and followed him to the fireplace where a small marble figure stood on the mantel. A crowd was gathered around it, but they made way for us. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, I think — a dancing Naiad, arms upraised, with delicate leafy vines twined around the exquisitely modeled limbs.

Dustan removed it from the mantel and handed it to me, that I might see more clearly the fine detail of the work. The others drew nearer, and Ghiselli, his artistic soul aflame, pressed closer.

Full of awe, I took it in my hand, and revered its beauty. And then the most terrible thing possible happened. It slipped through my fingers and fell with a crash on the stone

hearth. And out of the shock that possessed me, I cried:

“ Damn it! ”

Nobody noticed it in the face of the greater catastrophe — nobody except Dustan and me.

My horrified eyes sought his, and I knew that his pained look was not for the shattered marble lying face downward on the floor.

The guests came clustering around us, and I wanted to die.

Ghiselli sprang forward and picked up the broken thing amid a dreadful wave of regrets faintly breathed. The arms were broken, one foot gone, and delicate vines tinkled back against the hearth.

He tragically fitted the fragments together, while I stood paralyzed, staring, not at the ruined marble, but at the grinning spectre of my own humiliation.

I turned my back. “ I can’t say anything, Dustan! ” I jerked out.

He started out of his bewilderment and came close to me.

“ Annette! It’s nothing. Don’t worry. It’s *nothing!* ”

There was everything in his tone; kindness, love, forgiveness, excuse, but I wanted to run away and hide my face forever from his eyes.

I hung my head; I couldn't answer him. But he didn't require it.

"Serena, dear." He turned smiling; "isn't that kettle ever going to boil? Reach the caddy there, Ghiselli, please. And if you are going to cut the cake, Elsie; be at it."

Everybody stirred, breaking up the tragic group, and the afternoon progressed. But it was ruined for me, no matter how well bred everyone acted.

Everyone else seemed to forget all about it, but I thought the afternoon would never end, although I dreaded the moment when I should be alone with Dustan on the way home. Elsie was going from there to keep an appointment down town.

At last the awful minute arrived when I found myself outside in the street alone with Dustan. The fog was rolling in thick and cold, like a slow, visible wind. A man was lighting the street lamps. Dustan wanted to call a taxi, but I wouldn't let him.

I wanted to walk, to walk for miles and let the cold fog beat against my face. I swung along with a country stride, and he kept pace with me, chatting pleasantly. Yet all the time I felt the undercurrent of his deeper thought, and was as dumb as one of my own cows.

At my hotel, he followed me in to my little

sitting room, turned on the lights and the heater, and asked if he might stay a few minutes.

I nodded, unable to speak as I flung off my wraps.

He removed his overcoat and laid it on the lounge.

I crumpled up beside the table and hid my head, blurting out between my sobs, "I'm not in the habit of swearing, Dustan!"

"I know it." He came to me and raised me to my feet, put his arms close around me and held me.

I couldn't say anything more. I just leaned against him and cried.

He said: "Annette, you're going to marry me right away." I felt him slip his ring from his own finger to mine, over the end halfway — and it stopped. It wouldn't go on!

I sensed his surprise, but I knew what was the matter. I had sprained that finger pulling weeds out of the garden, and indignant nature had retaliated the only way she knew how.

Dustan knew too, in a minute. He kissed that terrible big knuckle in a sort of savage way, saying fiercely:

"Thank God, Annette! You'll never have to go back there. I'll keep you here with me."

The humiliation of it swept over me drying my tears as the north wind's hot breath burns

the moisture from the soil. I drew out of his arms; that distorted finger seemed to grow into a monstrous thing that thrust itself between us.

“Let me go, Dustan,” I said in a choked voice. “I can’t marry you until I shake off the hold of the ranch. It binds me like a leash. I’m going north tomorrow and sell it.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE NEW OWNER

The next evening found me in the station where Paul and I had left the train on our first visit to Stonehouse County. I was there again, and there was no change in the place; only I was changed and — alone.

There was the same hot street with the dusty automobiles, the same ticket agent with his bib overalls, and the same truck empty of luggage. At the far end of the station a group of hoboës lounged by the track.

I glanced at them, wondering if any of them would work if they were offered a job. But, thank Heaven! I didn't want any of them; I was through with that. One burly, bearded creature looked at me in passing, and afterward I saw him peering into the station where I waited for a hired car to take me out to the ranch.

After a fifteen minute wait, old Mr. Potter came with a shiny new Chevrolet, and we left the town behind.

The country was fast turning brown, except in the irrigated fields for it was nearing June;

but everywhere was the promise of the soil in the lush fields of alfalfa and the orchards laden with green fruit. It interested me the more perhaps that I was going to cast it all behind me.

Strange people were on the Hilyard place. I didn't see anyone at the Forest's as we passed; perhaps they were not at home. At the Cattman place I saw a fat Indian leading a team to the barn.

I paid the taxi driver at my own gate and walked in to the house carrying my suitcase.

Mr. Jones was in the kitchen with a gingham apron tied around him, getting supper. I heard one of the children say, "Papa, here's a lady."

Mr. Jones was awfully surprised to see me, and very sorry to have to tell me his wife was not at home. She had gone to Daughter Susy who was expecting a new baby.

He asked me in, however, and carried my suitcase into the spare room. He opened the doors to let in the cooler air, telling me to make myself at home, supper would be ready in a minute.

The spare room was my own room about as I had left it except there was a different counterpane on the bed and crocheted tidies on the bureau.

Everything was very clean. Mary had written Martha that Mrs. Jones was an excellent housekeeper.

It was hot. I changed my suit for a white voile, and my brown shoes and stockings for white ones, combed my hair and washed up a little before Mr. Jones sent Tommy in to tell me that supper was ready.

During the meal Mr. Jones said that his wife had been gone nearly a week. Susy's husband worked on a ranch about six miles away — they had a house and lived there. But this being a busy time, of course Frank, Susy's husband, had to be at work. And Susy was afraid to be alone, hence, Mrs. Jones's absence. It was timely, since they had no hired man just now.

Before we finished the meal, the telephone bell rang. Mrs. Jones, at the other end of the wire, said that the baby had come, and Susy wanted Pa to come over.

Mr. Jones came back to the table with regretful apologies, but I told him to go along and see Susy. "No, no," I insisted. "Let Tommy go too. I don't mind in the least, staying alone. Of course Tommy wants to see the baby."

They got off soon after supper. Mr. Jones said they'd probably not be home until late, and he'd bring Mrs. Jones.

I was glad to be alone as I wanted to prowls

around the yard, and go out and visit the cows. After washing the supper dishes, I took the half hour of remaining daylight to go over the yard.

Everything was neglected and choked with weeds. My orange trees were dead. Evidently Mr. Jones had neglected to protect them during the winter. The pigs had rooted the flower beds over and over until not a trace of bloom was left, except one sad marigold starving for water at the edge of the walk.

“If I didn’t expect to sell immediately, I’d get a man and put him in here to clean this up, just for the look of things,” I said. And then I thought of the husky tramp at Maples.

But my beautiful oaks and walnuts were still the majestic creatures I had left. I went out and stood under the spreading branches and looked up at the sky. Such largess! Such majesty! Such a triumph of the striving soil, this great oak whose branches bending, touched the ground; whose branches reaching, swept the sky, or seemed to, as I looked up through the twilight.

The old familiar silence greeted me like the voice of one long absent. I recalled the first time Paul and I had noticed this tree, and now Paul seemed to stand beside me, and be a part of the silence.

I heard a dog barking down at the Cattman

place. I wished that I had asked Mr. Jones to bring Zed back with him, for he had told me that Susy kept him over there for company when she was alone with just the children. Zed certainly was good company. I wished he were with me.

I went back to the house and sat down on the porch. A star appeared and then another, twinkling in the warm gray sky.

“The heavens were making room to hold the night,

The seven-fold heavens unfolding all their gates

To let the stars out slowly.”

The night darkened. It was awfully still and lonesome, and it seemed so strange to be wandering around the place alone, when there had always been such activity.

The twilight hour was when Paul used to like to play, and often the men came to the porch to listen. I went inside and tried to open the piano, but it was locked. Mrs. Jones evidently was a careful woman.

It was too early to go to bed. Lighting a lamp, I carried it into Paul's room. Everything was changed. Undoubtedly it was the children's room, for toys and picture books and small shoes and stockings littered the floor.

Back into my own room, I picked up my

jacket and hat and hung them up in the closet, and put my brown shoes and stockings under the bed.

At the end of my resources, I sat down in a rocking chair and thought of Dustan, of his kindness, patience and understanding, and of all the years of love he had spent on me, and I wondered if I should be able to fill his life as he deserved.

My thoughts were so busy I didn't pay any attention when the screen door creaked, but conscious of a presence in the room I looked up.

I sprang to my feet. The dirty, unkempt night visitor who confronted me certainly had no business in my room. It was the same man I had seen at Maples peering at me through the window.

He took off his battered hat like a gentleman, revealing bushy hair of rusty blonde, and beard several shades darker covered half of his swollen, dissipated face. With a start, I recognized him anew — Dick Patton, many miles farther on the downhill road than when I had seen him last.

I stepped backward. "You?" I said; "back again!"

"Most certainly," he answered with a dreadful smile. "A good collector always comes back. I've come to get my pay."

“ I don’t owe you anything,” I said coldly.

He turned around and put his hat on the floor, a clumsy, awkward gesture, and straightened up.

“ You don’t? Look here! ”

With his dirty fingers he parted the puffy lids of his right eye, and the eye *was* out! The ball itself was gone; and the empty socket leered at me hideously.

I stared at him in stupid horror. It was like a wizard’s trick.

“ How did it happen? ” I asked at last.

He took down his hands letting the lids close. They went together as a dead reptile squirms after life is extinct.

“ You don’t need to ask that. You know. And you’re going to pay for it tonight, with interest.”

I still stared at him with a dreadful sinking feeling. Undoubtedly he had met with this disaster in some brawl, and he now made use of it. I tried to think. Knowing that he was now, not a hot blooded creature of primitive passion, but the cold, relentless and cruel product of degraded civilization, I knew we were going to have it out this time. And I saw in his bloated face and one sinister eye that any favor I gained in the ensuing struggle would not be through his generosity.

“ Well,” he said, narrowing his lids; “ are you ready? We’re all alone, just you and me. I’ve got you this time. Haven’t I? ”

My heart pounded at his crafty smile, but I nerved myself, and said curtly: “ Not necessarily.”

“ No,” he leered at me with that one awful eye. “ You might cry and I might let you off, if you asked me pretty, on your knees.”

He didn’t fool me any. I returned his look with a glance of scorn.

“ I shall not go down on my knees to you,” I said coldly. “ If you want to kill me, do so. I can die but once.”

“ You’ve got plenty of grit now,” he said. “ I wonder how it will last. You’ve got *two* eyes, you know to put out — first.”

I knew then, that the man was insane. I felt the blood drain out of my face.

“ But,” he continued gloatingly; “ I’m not going to put out your pretty eyes, nor kill you, nor hurt you in any way, providing, of course, you are good and reasonable, and pay your debts like an honest woman should.”

My very brain turned hot. I knew why men fight. I wanted to kill him! to smash his horrible, smiling face; to slit his fat throat and let out the blood I could see pulsing up and down in his neck. The fury in me smothered my fear.

“An honest woman pays no dishonest debts,” I retorted, reading admiration for my daring in his eye; but I knew too, that wasn’t going to help me any.

“A kiss five years old,” he continued with a hideous travesty of persuasion; “I’ve waited; you’ve waited. But it’s not been my fault.”

“You need not include me. I have never been famishing for your vile kisses.”

He flushed angrily. I could see that his crafty patience was ebbing fast. My mind searched frantically for some means of outwitting him; as he stood there his head thrust forward watching me with that awful eye.

If I could put out that eye! I might escape in the ensuing darkness. I was not horrified by the idea. I began to consider how I could do it.

He was watching me like a hawk, and I watched him in return as animals eye each other warily before they spring.

He lessened the distance between us with a forward step.

I retreated with a shudder I could not suppress.

Thrusting out a long arm, he seized me, and blind, stark terror overwhelmed me.

“Halleck!” I screamed with no idea of what I was saying. “Halleck!”

“Never mind, pretty little wildcat. We won’t wait for Halleck.”

His horrible, hairy face was close to mine. I could smell his foul breath. Every atom of my being shrank in horrified revolt. I struck out like a cat, my fingers clawing for his good eye.

I missed it, for his hand flung mine aside, but the blood followed the track of my nails down his face.

He cursed me as he tried to catch and hold my wrists, but curses didn’t touch me. I fought with feet and claws and teeth like a wild animal.

“Fight! You little devil, fight!” he hissed; “and fight yourself out! You’ll pay for that too!”

I heard it through his clenched teeth. I saw, like a horrible moving picture, his fury-inflamed face close to mine, the blood trickling down into his beard. He could have overpowered me with one blow of his fist, but my whirling brain knew that he was letting me fight myself out, grimly taking the punishment.

Time after time I broke away from his hold, only to be snatched roughly back as he laughed his taunting laugh.

I set my teeth in his arm. I could taste the welling blood.

He savagely struck me loose and I reeled

backward, my breath coming in gasps of pain, my arms weighted as with lead. I was nearly done. I knew it and I realized by his triumphant laugh, that he knew it too. He caught me again, gripping my wrist with his puffy fingers, and sick horror closed in on me.

“Halleck! Halleck!” I shrieked. “Halleck!”

The miracle of Halleck’s voice answered.

“Coming, Annette. I’m here!”

My surging ears heard his flying steps across the porch, the rip of the wire as he crashed through the screen. I saw him leap on Patton’s shoulders and we all went to the floor together.

Freed by the fall, I scrambled into a corner, crouching there while the two men rolled and struggled on the floor, breathing hoarsely like fighting dogs.

The chairs crashed, the table overturned, the lamp on the dresser tottered, as locked in a fierce embrace, they pitched about on the floor. Sometimes Halleck’s tense white face showed, only to be blotted out as Patton’s bloated visage came to view.

Patton broke loose from Halleck’s grip and staggered to his feet, but like a wild animal Halleck leaped upon him and bore him down again, and uppermost, astride of his burly

body, Halleck's fingers gripped and sank into his pulpy throat.

Patton's face purpled, his starting eyeball bulged the swollen lids apart. He writhed and twisted, his heavy limbs threshing the air, and his body rolled under Halleck's inferior weight.

From my corner, watching dully, I saw that his bulk was too much for Halleck. Little by little, almost imperceptibly, Halleck gave way. With his teeth clenched and every nerve strained to the breaking point, I saw Halleck give out his last ounce. And Patton, with a final lurch, flung him to the floor and set a heavy knee on his chest.

"Now I've got you! Damn you!"

His fiendish face with his coarse lips drawn back from his tobacco stained teeth, hung over Halleck, but I couldn't move.

He paused, gulping for breath, then he reached somewhere in his clothes and jerked out a long knife.

Halleck's face white with defeat, his eyes of lost hope, told me the thing was over. I knew we were near together, and near Paul. I shut my eyes, brain and body inert and powerless, as if I were already dead, waiting for the sound of the blow that would let out Halleck's life.

But Halleck's last thought was for me. His

last breath hissing through his spent lungs panted:

“Get out of here, Annette! Run!”

It galvanized me into life.

With an uncivilized yell I rolled out of my corner, gripped both hands full of Patton's bushy hair and jerked his head backward.

He had to come with it.

As he lurched and sprawled, Halleck pounced upon him, grabbed his arm, twisted it under him and threw his weight on it.

The bone snapped like a stick.

The knife fell to the floor and his shriek of pain and fury filled the house, and with it, the fight went out of him.

“He's safe now,” panted Halleck holding him down. “Let go, Annette dear; don't scalp him. Get something to tie him with.”

Reluctantly I released my hold, caught up a turkish towel, and cutting wide strips from it with Patton's own knife, I helped Halleck bind him hand and foot.

He groaned and writhed feebly, cursing Halleck with everything he could lay to his tongue.

“Cut that out,” said Halleck curtly. “That don't buy you anything! Besides Miss Torrel's heard enough.”

Anger flared into Patton's pain racked face. He flung one bitter word toward me.

Halleck lifted his clenched fist and I thought he was going to strike, but he gritted his teeth and, busy with his knots, he cast his eyes about the floor. They fell on my silk stockings under the bed.

With a sweep of his arm he gathered them up and crammed one into Patton's offensive mouth. A deft twist tied the other around his bearded jaw.

The job finished, we both stood up, confronting each other.

Halleck's face was still white with the strain and his light shirt torn and blood stained, and pulled out half way round. Mechanically he began stuffing it in.

"My God, Annette! That was a close call! Where did you come from? How did Patton get here? What does it all mean? How did he know you were here?"

I filled my still smarting lungs to answer him, but my glance went past his pallid face to the mirror behind him, to my own horrible reflection.

There I saw myself with torn clothing and streaming hair, my face stained with blood, my lips cut and swollen, and a black bruise over my left temple.

I didn't answer Halleck. Turning away in horror, I saw myself a cut-back from civiliza-

tion, a fighting savage. I could see, standing beside me, Dustan's mother, cool, pale and gracious; Serena, with uplifted eyebrows, and Dustan, so like his mother, looking at me with pained eyes.

I covered my dreadful face with my hands and began to sob.

Halleck came and put his arms around me, and tried to draw me out of the room, but I hung back, crying hysterically:

"Don't touch me, Halleck! Don't look at me!"

"Why?"

"I'm a savage," I wailed; "a fighting squaw!"

He gently pulled my hands down from my face, and with great tenderness kissed my bruised lips, and folded me close in his arms again.

"No, you're not, honey. You're all right! The nerviest little scrapper in the world. Don't cry, dear; don't cry!"

But I clung to him, sobbing in hysterical reaction. "I *look* so!"

"You're beautiful," he averred. "Come, let's go out on the back porch and wash up. You'll feel better then."

I yielded to his urge and he led me through the house as far as the telephone in the dining

room. There, while he held me with one arm against his shoulder, he telephoned to the Officers to come and get Patton.

"I'll see that he's put somewhere this time so he won't bother you any more, Annette, if I have to send him to the Morgue."

A faint groan came from the bed room.

"Halleck, he must be suffering."

"It won't be long. The sheriff said he'd come right out, and bring a doctor with him."

He hung up the receiver and we went on to the well. He drew a bucket of water and filled the battered old blue and white basin for me. Standing near me while I dipped my face and hands in its grateful chill, he asked:

"Why did you call me, Annette?"

"I don't know," I said shakily. "How did you happen to hear me?"

"I was on my way up here," he answered. "Bob broke a sickle this afternoon, and I came up to see if Al had any section rivets. I thought he was at home, but I didn't know you were here until I heard you call. Good God, Annette! If I hadn't heard you!"

I emptied the basin and went to fill it for him. He followed me, and putting his arm about me, he poured the water from the bucket while I held the basin. He washed, and we used the roller towel together.

He repeated the children's rhyme:

“ ‘ Wash and wipe together,
Live a happy life forever.’ Won't we, Annette? ”

I nodded, with my face buried in the towel.

“ But, Halleck,” I said, uncovering my face.
“ It really doesn't matter now, but it's been on my mind so long — ” I asked him about his intentions to marry the ranch.

“ How did you know I said that? ” In his surprise he paused from scrubbing his wet hair, leaving one long tousled lock standing like a corkscrew on end.

I didn't tell him.

“ Yes, I said it,” he confessed; “ to fool old Bob — I had to shut him up somehow; he was too near to guessing my number. But it wasn't the ranch. To tell the truth, honey, the way things looked, I didn't think you were going to make it. It was you, but I couldn't tell Bob that, because he loved you too.”

“ But hadn't you promised to go with him? ”

“ Sure. But hadn't I promised to stay with you? How did you find out all this? ” he insisted.

I told him briefly. “ And that was why — you had to wait; why I *couldn't* care whether I hurt you or not; why — I expect — I *wanted* to hurt you.”

He dropped the towel and put his arms about me. "You did hurt, honey," he said; "but I could stand it as long as I had you — but when I lost you —." His arms tightened and held me closer. "I love you, Annette. I have loved you all the time since the first day when you showed me how you drove a Ford."

"Halleck, that was too silly of me!"

"No, it wasn't. It was just the person you are. How about it, dearest? I want to farm, but this darned life's too lonesome without you. Won't you come and let's farm together?" He threw back his head to search my face with the questioning eyes of an affectionate child.

I looked into his clear eyes so full of love, and all petty things faded; — over me dawned the illuminating vision of the great light of life. I said:

"I must have loved you, Halleck, since the night we went after the lamb, but I've just found it out. Yet that's soon enough, isn't it?"

I put my arms tight around his neck, and laid my lips against his. And as we clasped each other in that close communion, I knew that the Master stood near, and his engulfing arms — the age old grip of the land encircled us and bound us to his service.

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